

Seeing Colonially: Martin Parr, John Thomson And The British Photographic
Imagination

by

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DEDICATION

To my grandmother Ruby Anna Wilson and my husband Farhang Amini.

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ABSTRACT

The British contemporary photographer Martin Parr's collection *7 Colonial Still Lives* (2005) delivers banal and benign images of remnants of British colonization in Sri Lanka. Parr's early collection *The Last Resort* (1986) was harshly critiqued for its judgmental lens of the working-class British, with some identifying a contemporary "othering" in Parr's imagery, yet this line of reasoning was never explored fully. I form a postcolonial reading to argue that what Parr's critics sensed was the historical legacy of British colonial photography. Parr reversed the traditional colonial trope of "othering" onto England's own working class, a technique the artist formulated that actively emulates the earliest photographic practices of colonial photographers such as John Thomson and his collection *Street Life in London* (1877). I am able to further establish a visual legacy between Parr and Thomson through their work in still life photography and its origins in global colonial networks.

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Introduction

The British contemporary photographer Martin Parr, in his short photobook, 7 *Colonial Still Lives* (2005), delivers seven seemingly banal and benign images of remnants of British colonization in Sri Lanka. Traveling through three former colonial cities, Parr photographs small, simple details that invoke a large, complicated history. Through a tasteless bowl of porridge, plastic-wrapped jam cakes and a cheap tuxedo, Parr welcomes us to closely inspect the manufactured consequences of British colonial rule. Perhaps more importantly, he has offered us an opportunity to view the world through the eyes of a British colonialist, where porridge, having travelled thousands of miles and culturally displaced from one small island to another, evokes the sur-reality and preposterous truths of colonial networks, economies, exchanges and relationships of power. Hence, as I will argue, Parr has invited us to “see colonially,” to use a period-eye that invokes the simultaneous birth of photography and the height of the British colonial empire.

The origins of Parr’s technique of “seeing colonially” began in the early 1980s.¹ His groundbreaking color collection *The Last Resort* (1986) solidified his position as a forerunner in British contemporary color photography. However, several critics, as well as many audiences, dispensed harsh reviews over his representation of the working-class vacationers of Northern New Brighton, who seemed to be presented as unenlightened hordes of styleless, sweaty underclasses. The English working classes have been

¹ Parr’s early photographic project in Hebden Bridge is the actual beginning of his distant, judgmental lens, as has been noted by Val Williams in her early retrospective and Stephen Dawber in his essay “Martin Parr’s Suburban Vision”. This is true; however, Hebden Bridge was more of an early experiment in documentary, and not yet a fully decided upon, individual style.

traditionally represented in a respectable and compassionate vein, their hardships portrayed in the reverent tones of black and white by Britain's cadre of social documentary photographers such as Chris Killip and Bill Brandt, and critics immediately rendered Parr's collection, in comparison, as distantly judgmental and coolly patronizing. Since that time, Parr has largely been unable to escape the reactions to his first color output. Yet, why was the criticism so harsh? What was the specific aesthetic lens that enabled Parr's controversial images? Throughout the discord, Parr's strongest defenders, from the 1980s through today, have safeguarded his images in *The Last Resort* and his overall reputation by arguing that Parr is simply employing humor in his photographs and that specific British humor is the primary defense against any ethical, photographic transgressions. However, in this paper I will argue that what Parr's critics sensed, and what his defenders missed (or dismissed), was a historical legacy of British colonial photography that Parr weaves into his images. I contend that both critics and defenders of Parr accurately detected a contemporary "othering" of the people of New Brighton, eliciting a spectrum of reactions ranging from squirming uncomfortably to staunch outrage. Parr reversed the traditional colonial trope of "othering" onto England's own working class, a particular technique the artist formulated that emulates some of the earliest photographic practices in Britain.

I will elaborate on my formulation of "seeing colonially" by furthering the photo-historian James Ryan's investigation of colonial "ways of seeing" in nineteenth-century photography. As Ryan's research informs us, England has a photographic history of visually colonizing its own people—in other words, of controlling them through

photographic techniques.² Using the example of the nineteenth-century commercial photographer John Thomson, who traversed Asia amassing a spectacular *oeuvre* of geographical and ethnographic images in service to the empire, Ryan traces how Thomson then returned home to London to focus his lens on his own people in the collection *Street Life in London* (1877). While Thomson is certainly not the only nineteenth-century photographer in the employment of colonial visual regimes, he is the first to reverse that colonial lens onto his own British people with similar results.³ In this paper I aim to establish a visual legacy between Thomson's street photography of Victorian London's working poor and Parr's street photography of Thatcher's New Brighton working class. Moreover, I connect Parr's direct invitation to "see colonially" in *7 Colonial Still Lifes* to Thomson's nineteenth-century experimental still life photography, further establishing a visual legacy between the two artists. Illuminating Parr's indebtedness to colonial photography provides us with a historical perspective that sheds new light on the scholarly and critical debates around Parr's work, as well as furnishes a fresh context in which to view Parr's entire photographic oeuvre, from the 1980s until today.

² James Ryan, *Picturing Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 19. Ryan interprets photographic moments as "ways of seeing" a wider historical and cultural account.

³ *Ibid.*, 174. Henry Mayhew's extensive work came thirty years earlier, *London Labour and the London Poor*, but Mayhew was not in service to the empire.

Seeing Colonially

A single small cup of porridge, rendered in great detail, sits on a synthetic tablecloth, a quiet study in tones of grey and beige (Fig. 1). The title, *Nuwara Eliya 2004*, denotes the former British colonial city well-known for its lush gardens, hills, tea crops, waterfalls and many species of birds and animals. The area is known locally as “Little England” due to its vegetation, cool climate, and colonial history.⁴ Parr would have undoubtedly been fascinated by a former island Kingdom being displaced by another island Kingdom.⁵ Despite the specific Sri Lankan title referring to the city of Nuwara Eliya, the image wholeheartedly signals Britishness: the double handled cup, saucer and spoon kit; the insignia, in English, of “The Hill Club,” the dark green color, and, of course, the porridge itself.⁶ Known as a breakfast food in Europe, and particularly abundant in the British Isles, porridge is outstanding in its ordinariness. Therefore, in a land, South Asia, known for some of the most extraordinary ingredients and cuisines in the world, a stodgy, mushy bowl of porridge is not only perplexingly displaced, but it is utterly ridiculous. This is typical of Parr’s imagery. In time spent with the image, we delight in the absurd irony and laugh at ourselves. Why eat porridge in Sri Lanka? In this once-colonial city, in order for English porridge to arrive, embed and survive in Sri Lanka there had to exist elaborate and sophisticated trade routes over land and sea, British ownership of indigenous lands, human labor on at least two continents, unimaginable expenses incurred in transport, servants to transport, cook, serve and clean,

⁴ Patrick Peebles, *The History of Sri Lanka* (London: Greenwood Press, 2006), 47. The British took control of the port of Colombo in 1796. They took full control of the island in 1815. Sri Lankan Independence came in 1948 with the local Anglicized elite enacting a British style Parliamentary government. Sri Lanka remains part of the British Commonwealth.

⁵ Ibid., 27. Several ethnic and geographical Kingdoms existed in Sri Lanka before colonial invasion.

⁶ Dana Arnold, *Cultural Identities and the Aesthetics of Britishness* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2004). Delineates many of the historical visual codes embedded in the traditional British identity.

private clubs set up by the British to maintain their physical, cultural and culinary separation, all to deliver into the stomachs of the then British residents, possibly the most boring and tasteless food imaginable.

Like porridge, many of Parr's photographs are shrewdly thick in layers of ambiguous and nuanced meaning that contradict their immediate simplicity and humorous attraction. These images require time and patience before they unfold. As we look closer at the bowl of porridge, we see the cup is chipped, the green paint is wearing, the spoon is scratched, the tablecloth is wrinkled, and there are food stains on the cup despite the clean spoon's indication that it has not begun to be eaten. Notably, porridge is also poor man's "gruel," a watered-down version of the original that conjures Dickensian working houses, peasantry, and poverty. It is a food rendered "slop" and it is grotesque. This odd displacement of English porridge into the hills of Sri Lanka creates a baffling profusion of questions that expels a sense of uncanny juxtaposition. In 2004 when Parr visited the former colonial island, Sri Lanka existed as a sovereign nation, yet a member of the British Commonwealth that maintains strong vestiges to its colonial past. A local Anglicized elite grew and after independence was declared, this "colonial elite" became the local ruling power.⁷ There is an irony, a reversal, that confuses and conflates in a bizarre twist as we are brought to imagine Sri Lankan members of The Hill Club participating in, paying for, and advancing colonial British culture and customs in a land that battled against British invasion and struggled for national independence not long ago.⁸ The porridge exposes the colonial past of Sri Lanka as a sign pointing directly to a

⁷ Peebles, *The History of Sri Lanka*, 66.

⁸ Peebles, *The History of Sri Lanka*, 50. Shortly after British invasion in 1815, an indigenous uprising occurred and was brutally suppressed by the colonizers. Ten years after the British Parliament was put in

sinister British colonization and its neo-colonial survivals today, as Sri Lanka continues to be governed by the English-speaking elite.⁹

Still life—*Nature morte* or “dead nature”—historically emerged as a Dutch 17th century painting genre associated with trade and capitalism.¹⁰ As the vast exchange of commodities emerged on a global scale, and the advent of consumer culture began, artists sought to capture these unprecedented relationships in an already popular domestic genre. Still life is ubiquitously rich, quotidian, and abundant. Yet still life is equally defined by a pathos that incites a premeditated nostalgia, that is, a continuous conversation of binaries such as life and death, beauty and decay, blustering and silence, abundance and scarcity. Like the traditional Dutch genre itself, Parr uses similar techniques that seduce the viewer into the image through stunning hyper detail, visual oddities, vivid color, commonly used objects, shiny points of reflection and humor; yet the same image, bewilderingly, contains the simmering, seething inevitable truth of decay, ruin and the grotesque. Parr’s aim, like traditional still life painting, always probes two sides of the same coin. In the bowl of porridge, Parr points to the entire life cycle of the British colonial project, from hopeful advances into global territories in the name of enlightenment and economic growth, to the establishment of British rule along with torturous colonial outposts to extract and produce copious resources, to indigenous nationalisms that reject and rebel foreign rule and demand individual autonomy, to the stubborn and floundering hanging-

place, with little consultation from indigenous populations, local Sri Lankans elected to remove the British-style government and implement their own democracy.

⁹ Peebles, *The History of Sri Lanka*, 7.

¹⁰ Julie Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). The premise of her book is the co-instances of the beginnings of global trade and global capitalism with the evolution of Dutch still life as a genre. She highlights colonialism in this relationship.

on of the Commonwealth, and into the future of the eventual end of the Commonwealth with the British presence peering into the horizon at its own death.

Through this historically prismatic viewing, Parr allows us to see colonially. Throughout this thesis, I use the phrase seeing colonially to illuminate a particular type of seeing Parr has been investigating throughout his photographic career. Seeing colonially, as I define it, is a type of photographic vision that originated during Britain's imperial expansions in the late nineteenth century. Its aim was the recording, surveillance and classification of subject matter with a goal towards control of peoples, acquisition of land and resources, and improvement of cultural foundations. Parr's bowl of English porridge in an established Victorian resort in Sri Lanka points directly to the British invasion of land, control of people and geographies and its canvassing of culture. In connecting Parr to colonial modes of photography, we are able to understand his photographic output as a form of contemporary commentary on Britain's perpetually shifting, yet constant, relationship to its imperial past, its imperial decline and its place in the world today.

Parr admits an eye for decay when he says, "I like the idea of Britain in decline--I mean, this once great country slowly going down the plug hole. So, I would look for any situation where that would be demonstrated."¹¹ He is able to show us the entire British colonial project summed up in a bowl of porridge. For Parr everything is always hiding in plain sight. How does one represent the epic history of the dumbfounding colonial cycle?¹² It is Parr's bold attempt to represent the unrepresentable. His method is effective:

¹¹ Val Williams, *Martin Parr* (New York: Phaidon, 2002), 74.

¹² Outside of the still life genre, the photographer Cecil Beaton produced images of the end of the British empire in the East from 1942-1944. His collections *Near East* (1943) and *Far East* are primarily conducted from the Orientalist viewpoint. The images fit nicely into this investigation of how British photographers represent the decline of the British empire. David Alan Mellor, "Picturing the End of Empire: Cecil Beaton," in *Creative Camera: Thirty Years of Writing*, ed. David Brittain (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 59.

he quickly lures us in with color, ensnares us with humor, then slowly, with time, we discover in the tiniest of grotesque details, staring back at us, the worst of ourselves. This thesis is a re-reading of Parr's imagery through a postcolonial lens, originally set in motion by his early and harshest critics. However, the still life work is able to deliver something fresh in performing a reversal. Parr may continue to be tethered to his "othering" lens, the still lifes work as an area of hope and evolution, as they are a reversal not onto the British population, but onto the empire itself, with much more successful results.

The Last Resort

When Parr began work as a professional photographer in the 1980s, color was primarily absent in British photography and color did not find its way into British photography until after it had been well established by American photographers.¹³ On both continents at the time, black and white film was traditionally reserved for the reverence of documentary photography. Subjects that required earnestness and were embedded with historical respect, such as the English working class, were only photographed in weighty black and white. After college, Parr began his photographic explorations in the 1970s employing black and white film firmly influenced by the work of the British documentary photographers Bill Brandt, Tony Ray-Jones, and later his friend Chris Killip. These early documentary photographers delivered mostly sober, unambiguous images of the poor and working classes with a quiet dignity. Brandt is well known for his powerful documentation of the London Blitz of 1940 as people gathered

¹³ Martin Parr, "Colour Before Color," *Aperture* 190 (2008): 22. Parr acknowledges America's acceptance of color well before Britain, yet identifies several British color photographers working before the Americans who have remained mostly unknown.

underground in air raid shelters to wait out the Nazi attack. Tony Ray Jones, a young and bright early documenter, discovered a particular English quirkiness in small seaside towns where the British seem to flock despite constant inclement weather (Fig. 2). His images of the English at leisure by the sea, are composed of a delicate humor built upon the recognition of playful national stereotypes that gently balances the sobriety of black and white documentary. Chris Killip was another documentary photographer using black and white film to chronicle the demise of the post-industrial North (Fig. 3). Killip formed relationships with Northern families struggling with no employment or dignified home life, photographed them and presented the achingly poetic collection *In Flagrante* (1988). Parr's early black and white work in North Yorkshire and in Ireland seems to mimic a lot of traditional documentary, especially that of his influences, as he keenly establishes traditional Britishness as a favored subject. While some of his early black and white images contain the humor he is known for, there is none of his signature biting, critical eye this early in his career.

Technology enabled color photography to emerge as a common practice around 1935 with the introduction of Kodachrome amateur color film. Color would immediately be taken up by advertising (by the 1960s was a standard in magazines) and film (and the three-color Technicolor of the 1930s) to great effect. The amateur photographer was to amass random snapshots for the family album, assembled in random sequences, forming a haphazard narrative rendered vulgarly bright. All of this was antithetical to traditional documentary photography. Color photography may be said to have never shaken its

original associations with the falsity of advertising creating a bias against color that in some forms still exists today.¹⁴

Early on, Parr was captivated by the American color photography of William Eggleston and Stephen Shore and the inclusion of color photography into MoMA's permanent collection and increasingly frequent exhibitions beginning in the 1950s. However, Britain was slower to adopt the color revolution that MoMA was supporting, and Parr had never actually seen a color photography exhibit in his home country. That is, until the then-obscure Leeds truck driver turned photographer Peter Mitchell exhibited his "A New Refutation of the Viking 4 Space Mission" at Impressions Gallery in 1979. Mitchell was the first British color photographer to exhibit in Britain and Parr was "immediately converted" by what he saw as a working class, quotidian despair in the Northern Leeds, but now in brilliant color.¹⁵

While Parr was greatly influenced by these color photographers, he had always instinctively held a fascination for color. As an obsessive collector, Parr was mesmerized early on by the ubiquitous hyper-color postcards of John Hinde, and he amassed a large personal collection from 1960s Britain.¹⁶ John Hinde's color postcards were excessively altered, created with a strict formula to be followed by Hinde's employees, and resulting in a flash of psychedelic brilliance. Hinde's most popular postcards were for Butlin's holiday camp, working class seaside resorts offering reasonably priced holiday getaways for families (Fig. 4).¹⁷ Parr was taken by Hinde's advertising-style representations of

¹⁴ Katherine Bussard, "Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography," in *Color Rush: American Color Photography from Stieglitz to Sherman* (New York: Aperture, 2013), 8.

¹⁵ Josef Chladek, "Peter Mitchell--Strangely Familiar," *Josef Chladek on Photobooks and Books*, Peter Mitchell - Strangely Familiar, Nazraeli, 2013, Portland – josef chladek

¹⁶ Thomas Weski, introduction to *Postcards* (New York: Aperture, 2008), 6.

¹⁷ Barry Lewis, *Butlin's Holiday Camp 1982* (London: Hoxton Mini Press, 2020).

working-class families on vacation rendered in exaggerated color and, while at school, Parr took a job as a holiday photographer at Butlins in but his works from that era are sadly in black and white.¹⁸

Parr attended college at Manchester Polytechnic to study photography. It was his first time leaving the suburban middle-class South, where he was born, and traveling to the predominantly working-class North. As Stephen Dawber has noted, Parr's education at his technical school was one aimed at releasing photography students into the working world, not academia or art and therefore Parr was trained primarily in the techniques of advertising.¹⁹ Parr remarked on his technical instructors in college, "They would be much more interested in the sort of top-rung advertising people who had come out of the 1960s."²⁰ Parr's continual use of vivid color in combination with an overly bright flash, even when outdoors, is a product of his training in advertising, where the aim is to immediately catch the attention of the viewer amidst strong competition in viewer-scapes, and subsequently create interest enough to maintain visual contact and ultimately leading to the creation of a desire, that (subconsciously) enacts a plan of attainment. With an eye towards the documentary of the Americans working in color and a training in advertising styles, Parr would eventually combine these with his own use of wit to form his signature style. From the beginning, Parr was breaking several photographic traditions: parting with traditional black and white imagery, combining documentary with color and, most disturbingly, he had marked a new designation for himself as a documentary photographer who employs a sarcastic, critical, distant, humorous lens. Tellingly he has

¹⁸ Williams, *Martin Parr*, 30.

¹⁹ Stephen Dawber, "Martin Parr's Suburban Vision," *Third Text* 18, 3 (2004): 255.

²⁰ Williams, *Martin Parr*, 30.

remarked, “The black and white is a celebration of life, and I was much more interested in being a critic.”²¹ The traditions of documentary photography stipulated that one was to sustain a respect for its subjects, a rule that Parr felt no need to oblige. Instead of respect, Parr used the traditional methods of advertising by using vivid unnatural colors, a bright outdoor flash, and producing images seen as garish and kitschy when made for documentary instead of magazines and billboards. He was no longer imitating his influences and had created a signature style that was his own; one that would inflame the sensibilities of critics and viewers all around.

One of Parr’s most endearing images from *The Last Resort* is of a young woman at work behind an ice cream counter, whose sour expression and hand on her hip appears to be frustrated with her job, the unruly customers and mostly with the intruding photographer (Fig. 5). A swarm of impatient, messy, sunburnt, young children want their ice creams all at once. We laugh at the image and the girl’s frustration with work and with Parr. His sneak attack is funny. The color composition is enchanting: subtle blue stripes in her work shirt echo the blue check of her co-worker's dress. In a serendipitous delight, each cone is the same faux teal blue. The warm tanned brown bodies mimic the wood panels. The white-hot outdoor light speaks of the summer heat and brings instant memories of lazy weekends at the beach—if you do not have to work, that is. Instead of work, the young girl’s attention is on Parr and his encroaching camera. She is clearly not happy with the photographer's intrusion in her busy shift. It is easy for us to see the young woman's future before her--long hours of unskilled labor, physical labor, low pay, several children to care for, frustrated and tired. Initially we laugh at her expression, but

²¹ Quentin Bajac, *Parr by Parr* (Amsterdam: Schlitz Publishing, 2010), 37.

with time spent with the image, we understand that we are a voyeur into her future that she does not understand yet. We stare with emotions that develop from humorous amusement to curiosity to pity then guilt. After time spent with the image, we see that the young girl is not only upset with Parr's intrusion, but it is us that she is angry with. How dare we pity her? Not only is the photographer seeing the young woman colonially, but he has implicated us, the viewer, in the same exercise, creating a distinctive discomfort.

In these years of 1984-1986 when Parr was patrolling New Brighton for these sorts of everyday, live-action soap operas to photograph, he was himself a young father with a new baby girl. Parr has proclaimed "I like to make fiction out of reality."²² This harks of a very specific visual narrative formation he purposely sets out to discover. In an earlier act of creating visual narrative, Parr's collection *June Street* was derived from his seeking the actual location of Coronation Street, the popular British soap-opera. Many of Parr's photobooks have a strong resemblance to televised working class soap-operas such as *Coronation Street*, *East Enders* and *Benidorm*.²³ An interest in working class drama and comedy, combined with his own new status as father, informed a lot of his viewing in *The Last Resort*. Here, we see a young mother with not enough hands (Fig. 6). Her weekend holiday consists of changing diapers and handling her baby alone, as the husband stands far to the side, headless, anonymous, unhelpful. She is awash in domestic materiality: stroller, blankets, diapers, purse, baby clothes, shopping bags and a pacifier she secures in her mouth because she needs help. Her motherhood materiality nearly swamps her, as we notice the piles of trash in the water behind her, indicating the

²² Magnum, "Martin Parr," Magnum Photos, <https://www.magnumphotos.com/photographer/martin-parr/>

²³ The *June Street* collection mimics the popular television series *Coronation Street*, while Parr also shot a photobook on location in Benidorm, Spain titled *Benidorm* that mimics the television show *Benidorm*, filmed around the same time.

inevitable cycle of products that all families propagate. The mother is front and center with Parr's flash directly on her, forming a working-class Madonna. She is the Liverpudlian Madonna burdened with her new demands of motherhood as she visibly worries over the struggles she knows her child's future will bring. She peers off into the horizon, the blank space, as if daydreaming of being elsewhere, a true vacation, where she is not inundated with dirty diapers and piles of trash. As her baby waits for her, and her husband waits for her, she is the labor of the domestic sphere, with no bourgeois-vacation smiles and giggles, only frustration and worry amidst her domestic purgatory.

In another image, it is the father this time who cannot escape the weight of family responsibilities even on a nice day out (Fig. 7). On a crowded cement street, flanked by a distant rusty fairground, a troubled couple with their children worry over each other. Like the Madonna, presumably in a nearby area, the father stares off into a middle-distance detachment, looking engulfed in his frustration and anxiety and possibly loneliness. Signs of working-class vernacular culture such as his cheap fading tattoos, the old-fashioned pram and the couples' economic worries, pervade the image and supplant any possible fun or joy that the couple could possibly enjoy on a weekend getaway. Domestic life appears as a drudgery, sad and unbearable. Nothing indicates a fun weekend by the sea, except for the children, who are oblivious, although not immune, to the socio-economic policies that have created each of these families' crises. In tones of beige and blues, Parr's revealing flash on a summer's day belies advertisements usual beauty-subject. Lured in by bright colors and pops of central red and pink (an old advertising trick) we are caught off guard by the unusual subject matter, followed by amazement and pity and perhaps even grotesqueness and anger.

The Critics

The Last Resort was the photo series that delivered Parr his first professional success and real critical attention. It was first exhibited in 1986, locally for Parr, at Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool to a receptive crowd. Families from Liverpool would have frequently travelled to New Brighton on weekends and, as early reviews of the work attest, did not consider the images vulgar. They enjoyed someone seeing them, representing them and liked the humorous way their lives were depicted. However, on a second showing, the exhibit moved to London's Serpentine Gallery, a much more bourgeois crowd, and the reception was remarkably different. The critics were sharp and, in the tradition of British journalism, did not hold back their ire. According to the critic David Lee,

[Parr] has habitually discovered visitors at their worst, greedily eating and drinking junk food and discarding containers and wrappers with an abandon likely to send a liberal conscience into paroxysms of sanctimony. Even moments of petting intimacy appear pathetic given their gaudy surroundings and the posturing of its protagonists. Our historic working class, normally dealt with generously by documentary photographers, becomes a sitting duck for a more sophisticated audience. They appear fat, simple, styleless, tediously conformist and unable to assert any individual identity. They wear cheap flashy clothes and in true conservative fashion are resigned to their meagre lot. Only babies and children survive ridicule, and it is their inclusion in many pictures which gives Parr's acerbic vision of hopelessness its poetic touch.²⁴

Similarly, the critic Robert Morris remarked, "This is a clammy, claustrophobic nightmare world where people lie knee deep in chip wrappers, swim in polluted black pools, and stare at a bleak horizon of urban dereliction."²⁵ It was apparent to critics that the overabundance of semi-nude, tattooed, sticky-with-food, working class bodies

²⁴ David Lee, *The Arts Review*, August 1986, quoted in Val Williams, *Martin Parr* (New York: Phaidon, 2002), 159.

²⁵ Robert Morris, *The British Journal of Photography*, August 1986, quoted in Val Williams, *Martin Parr* (New York: Phaidon, 2002), 159.

lounging around piles of litter and dirty sand was too much for sophisticated urban viewers to bear. These critics who viewed Parr's work within the rarified atmosphere of London's Serpentine Gallery saw something much different than those first Northern observers. The difference in class viewings is an important aspect of the conversation that complicates the debate on Parr's early works. Several critics have questioned and pursued this condition of Parr's work, definitely one of his most consistent subjects, that continues to make it so alluring. However, for this thesis, my concentration is focused on Parr's harshest critics and the origins of his contemporary "othering."²⁶

Critics and viewers in London saw the images as blatantly patronizing, reckoning Parr a snobby Southern middle-class voyeur who had moved to the North, calculatingly trained his camera on the working class, and breezily passed judgment upon them. In breaking with documentary tradition, what they saw in the work was a clear lack of respect and empathy. In other words, what critics saw in Parr's images was a transgression of photographic ethics. Complicating Parr's imagery is the ethics of "photo-tourism", or the viewer taking a trip into the unseemly arena of the photographer's theatre with disgust and delight.²⁷ As a "cultural-tourist," the viewer purposefully seeks out to cross wide boundaries in the safety of image-viewing while maintaining their fixed class/gender/race lens.²⁸ Photography is inherently ripe with transgressions, however, viewers saw a blatant cruelty in Parr's images, an intentional shaming, in his lens.²⁹ In the

²⁶ A purely class "othering", through the lens of Gramsci and his *Prison Notebooks*, is an area of research that Parr's work would benefit from greatly but that I do not fully engage with here.

²⁷ Kieran Cashell, *Aftershock: The Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2009), 22.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁹ The debate actually appears to be a precursor to the later British wave of Transgressive Art in the 1990's, from which the Young British Artists and their "Sensation" evolved. Transgressive Art included the photographer Richard Billingham whose work shares attributes with Parr's, particularly the subject of working-class voyeurism.

mid-1980s Parr took documentary, added abrasive humor, cold distance, advertising tactics that resulted in a “cheeky” yet premeditated crossing of traditional ethical boundaries of documentary photography.

It may now be more difficult to view the images from *The Last Resort* as fully disgusting and cruel as they were initially received, especially after British art movements in the 1990s, such as Transgressive Art and the Young British Artists, they can even appear subtle. However, when seen against decades of photographic material representing the working class in Britain, photographs which represent this sector of society with compassion and even heroism, Parr’s photographs can rightly be seen as appalling.³⁰ However, by the 1980s, society had changed. Industry, so vital to the North and areas like Liverpool where Parr was photographing, had been disappearing, leaving local Northerners with high unemployment and an anxious uncertainty about their future; Parr’s photographs encapsulate this degradation.

In 1979 Margaret Thatcher was voted into Parliament. The North was particularly hit hard as her anti-union policies were implemented. Her radical conservatism and hyper-capitalism created an underclass that suffered greatly, primarily in the North. Her intention was to create a larger, ambitious, striving middle class through a populist conservative movement. Her abhorrence for state dependency and social welfare programs drastically cut the Welfare State, on which most of Britain’s working poor depended. All of this created a North with no jobs, no social resources and a realization that no one was to help. Staunchly resolute, Thatcher was determined to end every facet of socialism in Britain. Thatcher’s quote from 1987 declares her intentions:

³⁰ Such as the images of: Chris Killip, Tony Ray-Jones, Bill Brandt, Roger Mayne, Vanley Burke.

I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. "I have a problem. It's the government's job to cope with it. I have a problem. I'll get a grant." I'm homeless, the government must house me." They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbor. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There's no such thing as entitlement unless someone has first met an obligation.³¹

"There is no such thing as society" is a "Thatcherism" often quoted by historians to encapsulate the ideology of Britain under her regime. Parr's pun, *The Last Resort*, refers to the aging and deteriorating seaside encampments along the English coast, but equally to Thatcher's severe policies of "individualism" that drove the large majority of Northern citizens to a breaking point. That breaking point, or a last resort, can be seen in the worried and frustrated faces of Parr's mothers and fathers and in their desperate need for a weekend respite despite the lack of funds. It is possible that viewers' disgust at Parr's images were actually a veiled response to Thatcher's austerity measures and their abhorrent consequences. Other photographers of the same period as Parr were also making social documentary work and were producing some of the most exciting color work of their generation. However, overall, Parr's color contemporaries chose a different approach than Parr, resulting in far different outcomes.

One such artist is Paul Graham whose career launched in the early 1980s when he was commissioned by The Photographers Gallery, London to photograph his particular vision of Britain in the year 1984. Keenly aware of the social meltdown of Northern England, Graham began photographing the waiting rooms of Northern England's Social

³¹ Paul Graham, *Beyond Caring*, ed. David Chandler (New York, Errata Editions, 2011), no page numbers.

Security offices. He visited hundreds, and the ensuing photobook *Beyond Caring*, another punning title like Parr's, delivered image after image of a tense silence, seething boredom and a humble desperation. The unusual choice to photograph in color lends another layer of richness to the sweeping isolation and shame. Graham allows color and subject matter equal space: vile green walls, tomato red plastic chairs, grey partitions, filthy brown floors, stained mustard walls. Cigarette butts, coffee Styrofoam, fast food wrappers on the floor at the end of the day. Seats full of waiting, silent, hunched, worried men and women being asked to sit or stand for hours. Young children relate the urgency of poverty (Fig. 8). Graham proves himself a traditional social documentary reformer, in the same camp as Lewis Hinde and Dorothea Lange and Robert Frank despite his use of color, when he dedicates his project to its subjects. He says of the images,

they speak of humiliation, suffering, indignity and loss of compassion for those at the most vulnerable end of our society. To those who appear in these photographs, I dedicate this book, in hope that these images of them speak in a loud, clear voice of the indignity that they have suffered, and for the urgent compassionate reform of the welfare benefits system.³²

There are touches of humor in the book as well. The cover of the photobook is an image of a man with a newspaper opened to a Page Six-type topless young woman as his waiting neighbor slyly looks on alongside two illustrated men in the mural above them, grinning. This image is the book's cover, declaring itself amusing from the start. Another witty image is a blindingly lemon-yellow room electrified by fluorescent lights with a banal horse poster placed beside a ticket-dispenser and its "now serving" indicator. The choice of decorative subject is so bizarre and misplaced, as if trying too hard or not at all, that it compels a bitter chuckle. Yet the humor of Graham does not find itself placed on

³² Ibid.

the subjects of the assignment. Humor here is used as a gentle reminder that, despite it all, our ordinary everyday lives are many times comical. Humor here is a hopeful perseverance, a reminder of our actual lives outside the Social Security waiting room.

Another contemporary of Parr and an early adopter of color photography is the photographer, Nick Waplington. A student of Avedon, in 1991 he published *Living Room*, a highly acclaimed photobook of Northern England's working poor. Waplington had been photographing his friends, their neighbors and their children for several years in a Nottingham council estate. On Saturdays he would visit with his camera, spend the day with the two families, snapping photographs, not of strangers, but of friends who had given permission, and the resulting images can be shocking to a bourgeois audience, but they maintain an intimacy and have no sense of being transgressive (Fig. 9). They are chaotic without being judgmental; they show struggle without being repulsive; they are filthy without being patronizing. Waplington (as well as Graham, many times) chooses the point of view of the child, photographing from below, as to not place the photographer in a position of command. In his acknowledgements, on the last page of the photobook, Waplington even dedicates the book to his subjects: "This work was the result of a friendship which goes further than these pictures could ever go. So to Dawn, Jeff, Mick, Christine, Vicky, Dave, Janet, Lisa, Kelly, Melissa and Shane, here's to the future!"³³ While the families here are working class, living in social housing and economically deprived (one father has the word "empty" tattooed on his stomach), there are a lot of laughs, joys, and struggles that any viewer can sympathize with. The humor comes from the family members themselves and Waplington lets them take the lead.

³³ Nick Waplington, *Living Room* (New York: Aperture, 1991), last page.

Even when the photographs verge on the potentially crude, repulsive or transgressive (babies vomiting milk, a naked child alone in the street, a man feeling up a woman), Waplington transforms each visual opportunity for critique and mitigates it with a bit of tenderness through an Easter-egg pastel color palette, the uncondescending child's point of view, the strong narrative has us feel as if we feel we know these families, the "nuclear" family in which the father and mother as well as neighbors and grandmothers are always present, the copious smiling, laughing images that form a community always together through the toughest of times.³⁴ Every potential moment for a critical joke at the subject's expense does not translate as a joke, but rather as a familiar truth of family life that we all recognize and are able to smile at.

Color photographers in Thatcher's 1980s were responding to her harsh economic policies with empathy, respect and a call for social change. The switch to color for artists such as Waplington and Graham gave traditional subject matter a contemporary, sometimes startling, spin on a historically familiar subject matter. However, Parr was unique--no one had seen the working class like this before. His documentary images had a cold, distant, critical gaze. There was no text, no words, no colophons, rendering the images even harsher.³⁵ His use of outdoor flash elicited his color more garishly than his contemporaries, and his sneaky, voyeuristic point of view was seen as a snobby humor based in his own prejudice. Parr is the only photographer of his cohort to have a cruelty about his lens, which could be described as, instead of a revolt against Thatcher as his contemporaries had done, but an ingestion of the era's particular vision, a "Thatcherist-

³⁴ As opposed to *The Last Resort* where fathers are sometimes absent altogether, children stray off alone, and the narrative concerns the day-vacation, not families or individuals.

³⁵ *The Last Resort* is dedicated to his wife and daughter: "For Susie and Ellen".

lens,” if you will, much in the same vein as 1980s punk was a reaction but also a mimicry and an escalation of governmental cruelty. Thatcher's cold, stunningly bold policies and rigid attitude, I believe, inspired Parr to relay this sense of the moment onto his representation of those most affected by her policies.

Parr's harshest critics, however, would emerge later, after he had fully established himself as a successful photographer. This time the criticisms came from inside the photography encampment itself, galvanized by Parr's admission of full-time membership into Magnum was spawned in 1994. In fact, Parr was the most contentious Magnum candidate in the club's fifty-year history.³⁶ When applying for full membership to Magnum, member Phillip Jones-Griffiths urged all members to not vote for Parr's admittance. Jones-Griffiths argued that Parr was the antithesis of everything that Magnum stood for. His letter states,

Not for him [Parr] any of our concerned 'finger on the pulse of society' humanistic photography...His penchant for kicking the victims of Tory violence caused me to describe his pictures as 'fascistic'...His membership would not be a proclamation of diversity but the rejection of those values that have given Magnum the status it has in the world today.³⁷

He was referring to Parr's images from *The Last Resort*, published ten years earlier, and the moniker of “fascist” could not have been taken lightly by members or by Parr. After Jones-Griffiths waged a propaganda campaign against Parr, he was only barely voted in. Unhappy members demanded a second vote. Parr won again, marginally. Ten years after *The Last Resort* and Parr's contemporaries were still enraged over his imagery.

The inside contention continued. One year later, in 1995, Parr was present for his Paris exhibition of *A Small World* and Magnum founding member Henri Cartier-Bresson,

³⁶ Russell Miller, *Magnum: Fifty Years at the Front Line of History* (New York: Grove Press, 1997), 295.

³⁷ Ibid.

one of Parr's major early influences, attended. After viewing the exhibit, Cartier-Bresson said to Parr, "I have only one thing to say to you. You are from a completely different planet to me," and stormed out.³⁸ Cartier-Bresson later would write a letter to Magnum members in reaction to Parr's work,

the philosophy of a man taking himself seriously, without humor, where rancor and scorn dominate, a nihilistic attitude symptomatic of society today, from which stemmed my extreme insolence towards him. I personally have nothing against him, aside from a great curiosity about this hiatus which he represents. I do not even sense hatred in him, because hate and love are related, but only a bitterness of the stomach.³⁹

Bresson was known for a strong dislike of color and one can only imagine what he would have thought of Parr's neon, sunburnt, oblivious, European tourists. However, the most vitriol staged against Parr was the writer and curator Stephen Dawber who set out to defend the Magnum camp with his rant about photography's loss of "realism" which only a person who has never wielded a camera can profess so strongly.⁴⁰ Magnum, founded by World War II photographers, entrenched with soldiers, bewildered and resilient after documenting the devastations of war, could not fathom the future of Magnum directed by a member who took photographs of postcards of kittens playing with string.

The Defenses

The scornful criticism of Parr's images in *The Last Resort* naturally birthed a subsequent defense from friends, colleagues, and some photographic peers. These defenses come largely from the art world, such as publishing, museums, magazines. The passage of time has mellowed the work and Parr himself, currently courts less antagonistic subject matter. This has all softened the early vitriol surrounding Parr's

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Stephen Dawber, "Suburban Vision," 260.

imagery, yet he maintains his signature critical eye in a lot of his current work, some of it his most popular. Among the many theories as to why Parr would have chosen to represent in the style that he did, there emerged a few theories that were strongest and were most repeated, and they are: class divide between subject and viewer; humor; and color. Examining each of these theories individually, each of them can be understood as a natural defense, yet none of them succinctly target the genesis of the reactions.

To begin with, most of Parr's critics proclaimed him a culture snob, perpetually looking down his middle-class nose at the working classes. By that same logic, it was easy to proclaim it was the viewer (Parr and his critics included) who possessed a greater eye towards prejudice. As mentioned above, when the collection was shown in Liverpool, it was well received and only in a more bourgeois London was the viewership appalled. The photographer and writer Gerry Badger proclaims, "I must say I was amazed at some of the more vituperative comments and wondered if these critics were not simply looking at the pictures and seeing their own class prejudices reflected there."⁴¹ Val Williams, the scholar cited above, saw the issue being the difference between, not Parr's and the subject's class, but the viewer and the subjects. She contends, "The critical response to *The Last Resort* was primarily a class response and it was unfortunate that this response, sparse and uninformed as it was, somehow came to be seen as a 'debate.'"⁴² Williams says the reviews were, "Strong words indeed, but more a reflection on the viewers than the reviewed."⁴³ Parr's defenders seemed to want to allow him a complete pardon and lay all prejudicial viewing solely upon the viewer. While it may be tempting to absolve

⁴¹ Gerry Badger, introduction to *The Last Resort* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2018), 7. Badger is a friend and frequent collaborator with Parr, as well as his strongest defender.

⁴² Williams, *Martin Parr*, 160.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 159.

imagery rich in happy colors, humorous foibles and silly Englishness, we must remember that Parr has firmly stated his position as a critic, so we cannot simply dismiss all judgment on his part.

Another defense has been Parr's use of that particular type of English humor best described as ironic and self-effacing, witty rather than comical, deadpan, and riddled with anxiety.⁴⁴ For Parr, humor is always front and center, bold, and can be found anywhere and in anything. In Parr's first retrospective catalog, Williams rightly marks him as a satirist, one in a long line of British humorists who use comedy as an introduction to political critique.⁴⁵ Williams' explanation for the criticism Parr endured is his use of a unique sense of humor, laced in irony, anxiety and judgment, not traditionally used in documentary photography. Williams remarks, "There's no cynicism in Parr's gaze, just interest, excitement and a real sense of the comedic."⁴⁶ This opinion is starkly opposite to Cartier-Bresson as mentioned above, and striking how two people, both familiar with Parr, may see his works with entirely inverse messages. Williams goes on to say, "In some ways, his photographs are a kind of practical joke, seemingly harmless but destined to cause us to make fools of ourselves."⁴⁷ By zeroing in on his use of humor, Williams, and others, have sought to acquit Parr from his past critics. While humor is an important part of Parr's toolbox, it is certainly not "harmless" and should not be used as a whitewashing device. The humor present in Parr's images is performing a larger service to his photographic aims. To use the explanation "humorous" to encapsulate Parr's work

⁴⁴ An example is Parr's semi-self-portraits of the *AutoPortrait* series (2000).

⁴⁵ Williams, *Martin Parr*, 202. Williams rightly mentions satire especially present in *The Cost of Living* and *Common Sense*. An example of early British visual satire is William Hogarth and the literary satire of Jonathan Swift.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 160.

is to simplify the photographs from the nuanced images that they are and, as such, does not do his work justice. Also, Phillip Prodger, in the catalog for Parr's second retrospective, designates Parr a satirist yet he informs us, "He is, after all, an equal opportunities satirist..."⁴⁸ Humor can certainly be an equalizer, a leveling technique that enables humankind to recognize one another despite our differences. Prodger goes on to say, "Martin Parr has been accused of ridiculing the people he photographs yet the humor in his photographs never comes at others expense. Comedy exists where expectations are defeated, and there is a poignancy bordering on melancholy that emerges from much of his work."⁴⁹ Again, as with Williams, humor seems to be levied so as to regulate the cruelty that Parr's critics saw. One does not necessarily negate the other--humor is present, as is cruelty, and many times the two operate in tandem to great effect, something Parr's original defenders seemed to want to evade. In an attempt to describe Parr's "essence," the photography scholar Quentin Bajac points to comedy:

It seems to me the best term to describe this treatment, in which he displays neither empathy nor antipathy for his models, is deadpan. Although often used today in a pejorative sense to denote any documentary form of expression that strikes a neutral pose, deadpan refers historically to the American comic tradition immortalized by Buster Keaton and to a lesser extent Stan Laurel, of a certain neutrality in response to all circumstances, given rise to humorous discrepancies.⁵⁰

Bajac claims that Parr's neutrality, that emotional distance from the subject matter, is a component of his humor. I believe this is exactly what incited the critics to begin with. Parr's being from a different town and a different class, shooting in a seaside resort struggling under the austerity of Thatcherism, seemed largely to be a tone-deaf exercise

⁴⁸ Phillip Prodger, *Only Human* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2019), 10.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁰ Bajac, *Parr by Parr*, 10. Bajac is speaking about Parr's *Autoportrait* series.

with the humor *directed at the subject* instead of placed in a more neutral or socially mindful space.

Color photography was created amidst controversy and in the 1980s British color photography was still in its infancy. Naturally, defenders pointed towards color as a major source of criticism towards Parr's images. As I examined above, some color photographer's use of color was visually balanced by either their somber subject matter (Graham) or softer pastel color to mitigate the chaos (Waplington). However, Parr, not tempering anything, combined all variables of vulgarities, cold distance with hot color. Speaking of Parr's new style, his friend and photographer Gerry Badger notes, "Nor was this fundamental change in rhetoric welcomed with open arms by the old guard in photography, especially those who considered that sober black and white was the correct medium for the sympathetic recording of contemporary life."⁵¹ Williams says Parr was at a moment of disillusionment in his life when he turned to color, which feels ironic, but it is used to explain the abrasiveness of his saturation, as if a bitterness was emanating from within him.⁵² Parr himself says when referring to the criticism he received, "I think if I had done it [*The Last Resort*] in black and white it would not have been quite the same."⁵³ Parr knew what the earliest viewers of color photography had seen: it was suspicious, anxious, and made any subject more intense. There were a few other explanations for the critics' harsh reviews. Badger haphazardly points to everything from the natural gloominess of the seaside itself, to documentary photography's inherent

⁵¹ Badger, *The Last Resort*, 5.

⁵² Val Williams, "Jubilee Street Party," in *Singular Images*, ed. Sophie Howarth (New York: Aperture, 2005), 85.

⁵³ Bajac, *Parr by Parr*, 37.

detachment.⁵⁴ Proposing a more optimistic view, Prodger understands Parr's intentions through a more typically British perspective: the point is to keep calm and carry on, stating that we are not witnessing cruelty from Parr, but a resilience of the British people pushing through the Thatcher years.⁵⁵ However, it is generally felt that it was overall the use of color, perhaps combined with each of the elements mentioned above, that ignited the conversation and contentions around *The Last Resort*.

Parr's critics say he is patronizing and judgmental, while his defenders say he is simply imposing that particular British humor onto his photographs and viewers are taking them far too seriously. In a certain sense, both camps are right. However, I propose something further is happening in these images that dates back to the beginning of photography itself. The above defenses may each be partially true, however a new look at *7 Colonial Still Lives* and *The Last Resort* as well as a wider review at his *oeuvre* through the use of a postcolonial reading reveal new aspects of Parr's intentions.

Early in his career, as Parr began developing his judgmental eye, a few critics identified an "othering" they saw occurring in Parr's images. The artist and critic Julian Stallabrass, in an early review of Parr's exhibit *The Cost of Living* pointed out that Parr is making anthropological studies of "types," not individuals.⁵⁶ The debate that followed *The Last Resort* arose from viewers and critics sensing a judgmental, distant, premeditated "othering", based upon class differences, purposefully featured in Parr's images. Despite the efforts of several defenders to provide a more sympathetic explanation, criticisms of Parr's particular style of photography continued, indicating that

⁵⁴ Badger, *The Last Resort*, 8.

⁵⁵ Prodger, *Only Human*, 34.

⁵⁶ Stallabrass, Julian. "Martin Parr: The Cost of Living," *Art Monthly*, 135 (1990): 19.

he had formulated a style for himself and he was committed to its use. While a few critics accurately pointed to a repeated use of “othering” in Parr’s imagery, this position was never pursued to its fullest understanding, enabling a connection between the deliberate distancing and objectification of subject matter back to its theoretical origins. British imperialism and its multitudinous aftermaths across the globe today are sensitive discussions that many, when regarding themselves and their own history, may be hesitant to approach. Parr has always investigated those areas that make us uncomfortable, such as eating in public, global travel, public fleshiness, cultural exchanges, and people at leisure.⁵⁷ However, those are Parr’s more obvious points of investigation, and it is vital for us to recognize that he equally seeks to excavate our uglier, darker discomforts. I will add that Parr is plenty aware of the British people’s discomfort with their own imperial past, and he mischievously sneaks up to capture our discomforts, reflect them back upon us, purposefully intensifying our discomfort to make us squirm, yes, but also to ponder. Perhaps the lack of investigation into “othering” is an oversight, a subconscious sidestepping or a calculated decision. Regardless, the legacy of British colonial representation is present in Parr’s photographs, is a subject he pointedly interacts with, and is overdue for a comprehensive examination.

⁵⁷ Williams, “Jubilee Street Party,” 84.

Colonial Photography

Critics and viewers have noted a glaring “othering” by Parr of his subjects. In this section I take these observations to their ultimate conclusion, the beginning of photography itself, and the origins of seeing colonially. I conduct a mapping of the scholarship, as well as some of the first practitioners of colonial photography and its very specific ways of seeing, mechanisms and goals. Parr is certainly not the first British photographer to utilize a patronizing, judgmental gaze. Indeed, as I argue, what led to broad critical outrage upon viewing his imagery was actually an inherited aesthetic lens derived from a long history of photographic practices begun in the nineteenth century. Colonial photography, a now established area of study with broad and deep scholarship, was a powerful weapon of the British empire and the images that resulted from these enterprising photographers constitute an important field in photographic history. This colonial vision has bled through time and this hermeneutic-of-hubris has endured through such structures of hegemonic control as advertising, popular culture and mass media. This visual inheritance has been charted in England by the scholar Stuart Hall in the field of Culture Studies where he illuminates a contemporary othering, or a set of visual systems born of the colonial era that are ubiquitous and remain embedded in our collective psyches. In this section, I place Parr within two historically established systems that heavily employ mass-manipulation—colonialism and advertising—the latter intimately related in structure and aim to the former. In doing this, I trace Parr’s particular lens back to early British colonial pursuits, and I likewise ensconce Parr within his own contemporary era wrestling with the legacy of the colonial lens rebirthed into

newer systems of mass media that utilize and uphold the colonial lens with familiar yet advanced techniques.

A full understanding of my intentions here must begin with the work of Edward Said and his seminal text *Orientalism* (1978). The epistemological origins of the “other” began within a wider scope of study concerning the relationship between East and West, and Said’s concept of “other” is so significant to the understanding of his argument that it is introduced on the first page of his Introduction: “The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other.”⁵⁸ Said effectively delineates the long existing binaries between East and West, giving them names and characteristics. Said describes how the Orientalist (below, the Western writer) creates the “other” through distance and judgment:

What he says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or written is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact. The principal product of this exteriority is of course representation: as early as Aeschylus's play *The Persians* the Orient is transformed from a very far distant and often threatening Otherness into figures that are relatively familiar.⁵⁹

The Orientalist creates a specific, calculated representation of an unfamiliar people, a manufactured “other,” in order to comprehend, strictly through a European hermeneutic, and therefore to eventually control and dominate. Western representation of the “other” predicates that one not be of the group one is defining/representing, yet to possess a non-local knowledge of the group, resulting in the creation of an identity of/for them. Colonial representation of indigenous populations, or an “other,” was formed through utilizing a

⁵⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 1.

⁵⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 21.

number of strategies (as British literary historian Clement Hawes has articulated): abasement, taxonomic ranking, spectacle, absence, sameness, temporally remote, technically barren, assimilation and the grotesque.⁶⁰ Colonialists carefully manufactured their own “superiority” through a created difference, a contrived “inferiority” of the local, created in the imagination and deposited upon indigenous populations. Colonization, and the dehumanization required to maintain it, could not function without an “other” and it is therefore fundamental to the colonial mission. Said’s focus is largely on texts, with scant mention of a few influential painters and, unfortunately, ignoring early photography altogether. Later photography scholars would notice these absences and fill in the gaps.⁶¹ James Ryan’s influential text on colonial photography, *Picturing Empire* (1997), notes Said’s silence on photography while also declaring Said’s influence on his own line of work: “Whilst I am not concerned with specifically Orientalist representation it is worth noting, despite Said’s focus on literary texts, that photographs made by European travelers, explorers, commercial operators and scholars constituted an influential form of Orientalists discourse.”⁶² The study of these nineteenth century photographs and ephemera and their use in the empire has proven fundamental to colonial scholarship.

While contemporary viewers may understand photography as broadly subjective based upon the needs and desires of the operator (photographer), early photographic discourse in the nineteenth century (and well into the twentieth) was much more fluid and contentiously debated. Photography’s inception could not be separated from its scientific operations, specifically chemistry, and the first photographers, the Englishman Henry

⁶⁰ Clement Hawes, “Three Times Round the Globe: Gulliver and Colonial Discourse,” *Cultural Critique* 18 (1991): various pages.

⁶¹ Such as Linda Nochlin, Christopher Pinney, Zahid Chaudhary, Ariella Azoulay.

⁶² Ryan, *Picturing Empire*, 26.

Fox Talbot and the Frenchmen Louis Daguerre and Nicephore Niepce, were scientific inventors. Photography's steadfast association with science led nineteenth century society to essentially understand photography as an objective device for recording historical truths. This cultural understanding of photography as a precise recording of objective fact was subsequently put to use by the British empire as a vital component in its arsenal and was manipulated (the viewership and the frames themselves) by colonial photographers to deliver specific views of foreign peoples, geographies and resources required in order to collect, understand, possess, control, dominate and expand. Photography was used as a prominent weapon of imperialism through such European Enlightenment practices as military surveillance, geographical knowledge, taxonomies, ethnographies, cataloguing and archiving, among others.

Colonial photography remains an important field of study because we are better able to understand the colonial mission through closely examining these early images. James Ryan, mentioned above, a trained British geographer and lecturer like John Thomson himself, accumulated early photographs from unseen and uncollected archives in his remarkable text. Taking Said's emphasis on representation as a grounding principle, Ryan broadly describes the colonial lens: "Representation is a complex cultural process and therefore photographs must be understood as moments in broader discourses, or 'ways of seeing', which require historical delineation."⁶³ It is from Ryan's "ways of seeing" that I formulate a British Imperial seeing colonially used throughout this thesis.⁶⁴ This photographic practice is made of calculated imagining, framing and capturing (by

⁶³ Ryan, *Picturing Empire*, 19.

⁶⁴ I am also familiar with John Berger's television series for BBC Two and subsequent text *Ways of Seeing* (1972), whom Ryan does not cite.

the photographer); examined and understood by a removed, different, observer (by the viewer), that forms a “way of seeing” that is activated by a judgment, an ambition, a “superiority” that transforms this viewing into seeing colonially. *Picturing Empire* investigates, along with John Thomson, other British photographers such as Samuel Bourne, Francis Frith, Arthur Radclyffe Dugmore, Felice Beato and others, in their crucial role in trekking the globe and bringing the empire itself, and its visions, back home to England. Among the images investigated, Ryan champions family photographs, those often overlooked vernacular images and their importance in the archive, that can stand as our guides to perceiving history and culture in context.

Another seminal text probing colonial photography is Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson’s edited collection *Photography’s Other Histories* (2003). This text expands upon Ryan’s observations, broadening seeing colonially into the global twentieth century, and beyond the binaries established by Said and adhered to by Ryan. Expanding beyond the British empire, the text is a broadening past more obvious imperial locations, into an examination of colonial photography in Latin America, Japan, Aboriginal Australia, Native America, as well as photography created by these groups as they represent themselves and their own peoples. There is another widening of the field into a study of global studio photography, family photo albums, advertising posters, spaces of photographic interest that Ryan noted were in need of investigation. The once one-dimensional, established colonial view of “superior” looking at “inferior,” has been deconstructed and a more complex reading of early photography, furthering our ways of seeing to include what is outside the frame and into the surrounding cultural context. Important to my work here, is what the authors describe as a spilling-over of meaning

beyond the frame and even the photographer: “However hard the photographer needs to exclude, the camera lens always includes. The photographer can never fully control the resulting photograph, and it is that lack of control and the resulting excess that permits recoding, resurfacing, and looking-past.”⁶⁵

Lastly, Zahid Chaudhary’s *Afterimage of Empire* (2012) is an investigation of British colonial photography in India, but the author provides us with a fresh way of viewing colonial photography. Chaudhary carefully argues that “sensing” and “making sense” of photographic viewing is a process that has taught us how to “know” these images and constituted a formation of knowledge in both the British and the Indians in colonial India. Chaudhary tactfully delineates the initial, quick and intimate reaction that occurs when our intuitive sensing of a photograph then develops into a subsequent formation of knowledge about colonialism, empire, the British, India and Indians. Chaudhary delicately explains the epistemological activities, via the viewing of colonial photography, that make the horrors of colonialism possible. As seen here, colonial photography has garnered substantial scholarship and has evolved significantly from a nineteenth century, one-dimensional, binary vision into a fuller twenty-first century, prismatic, constellation. Each of these broader, more comprehensive viewing practices use Ryan’s seminal text as a point of origin then generously expand. Each reading helps to inform my interpretations of Parr’s colonial still lifes in ways not considered before. These ways of seeing expand beyond the frame, beyond the still lifes themselves and even beyond the photographer and engage in a conversation with colonial photography, in addition to and alongside with advertising, that delivers, mutates, and cements colonial

⁶⁵ Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, *Photography’s Other Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

photography in the contemporary age. These seemingly simple quotidian displays carry the burden of centuries weighted with the British colonial project. This nearly one hundred and fifty years of visual heritage begins with the origins of photography itself and its simultaneous use as an instrument of colonization. I return to the photographer John Thomson, adding new approaches to his work, who begins our quest into colonial photography, advertising and a contemporary “othering” of the British people.

John Thomson was employed by the Royal Geographical Society in 1886 as Official Instructor in Photography. Of course, the RGS had visions of expanding their “royalty” across much “geography” in the grand vision of colonial amplification. Thomson, speaking to the RGS as its photographer, exemplified the ambitions and hubris of the Victorian vision when he said, “We are now making history and the sun picture supplies the means of passing down a record of what we are, and what we have achieved in this nineteenth century of our progress.”⁶⁶ Thomson was in service to colonization and the camera was his weapon. In the earlier years of his career, between 1862-1872, Thomson traveled throughout Asia taking photographs of a picturesque landscape, taxonomies of peoples and myriad natural resources, as Britain sought to expand throughout China, beyond its island colony in Hong Kong. Thomson collected thousands of photographs with accompanying narratives that he compiled into a massive archive, *Illustrations of China and Its People* (1873-74). Aside from landscapes and natural resources, an important aspect of Thomson’s work is his investigation of city dwellers--their occupations, daily routines, living conditions, cultural habits and families--as he follows them along their ordinary occupational and domestic performances. These

⁶⁶ Ryan, *Picturing Empire*, 24.

photographs form some of the earliest examples of street photography, begun before the invention of flash, with the necessity of photographing outdoors and photographing persons unknown to the photographer, usually without permission. The attention to detail, such as details of dress, hairstyle, occupational instruments, posturing, and facial expressions display an anthropological study common in early colonial photography. Thomson's overall assessment of China was developed from an education formed in the service of colonization. He decides, "Poverty and ignorance we have among us in England; but no poverty so wretched, no ignorance so intense, as are found among the millions of China."⁶⁷ The direct comparison between England and China, China ranked as inferior, is constructed under a guise of charity towards the Chinese, with the implication that England will rescue the Eastern nation. Colonization is to be inferred as a welcome gift, thereby assuaging all guilt on the part of the English. This attitude exemplifies Thomson's view throughout his Asian travels and in his photographs.

After ten years travelling throughout Asia, Thomson returned home to London. At the time, Victorian England held a voyeuristic curiosity for the "other," much of which was facilitated by the new technology of photography, and compilations of photographs of "exotic" types were widely desired.⁶⁸ These photobooks were sometimes compiled to prompt legitimate social reform but, many times, were simply thinly veiled entertainment disguised as charity. Prolific social issues such as poverty, public health, unemployment and immigration in Victorian England led photographers into the streets as the public demanded "truthful" images from journalists, social reformers and philanthropists (and entertainers) wielding a camera. Thomson, along with the journalist Alfonse Smith,

⁶⁷ Ibid., 166.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 178.

enlisted in this popular enterprise, and set out to capture London's poorer South and East ends. The resulting photobook, *Street Life in London* (1877), turns Thomson's colonial lens onto his own British people with remarkably similar results. In *Street Life in London*, Thomson's focus is London's destitute whom he classifies according to profession, and lack of. For Thomson, the London poor was the new Asian "savage."⁶⁹ The entire photobook and its accompanying text is an odd intermix of journalistic sensationalism, quotidian humor, pity, picturesque, anthropological taxonomies and purported social justice. Thomson seeks out "characters" and "types" in the streets of London to supply the bourgeois viewer a better comprehension of the wild social topography right around their corner.⁷⁰ Thomson, of an upper middle-class status himself, addresses his street-dwelling subjects in the same manner he addressed the Chinese in his earlier colonial work: with a keen investigative and critical eye, devoid of any humanizing similarity or connection, and with a goal that served his personal interests. It is a collection in which there is a clear attempt at an "objective" lens aimed at the working-poor, however, the viewer is understood to be a bourgeois with an appetite for the theatrical. Is it sensationalism or is it documentary? Thomson (consciously or unconsciously) was experimenting with weaving genres and forming interdisciplinary creations in his images of the British working poor.

In an example, Thomson's *The Temperance Sweep* is a document of a man and his profession, the chimney sweep, a common occupation in Victorian England (Fig. 10). Accompanying text by Smith informs us that there were upwards of 2000 chimney sweeps in London with the sweeps usually composed of young children easily capable of

⁶⁹ Ibid., 165.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 179.

crawling in tight quarters.⁷¹ This man would be older than most. Child labor in Victorian England was common and not deemed improper regardless of the hazardous conditions of the streets, factories and mines. The profession of chimney sweep was respected because it was ubiquitously necessary, as the risk of fire was prevalent within the spreading urban area.⁷² Thomson employs a traditional documentary style of the straight-on portrait with attention to the face, but the explicit capturing of details in clothing, body type, facial expression, and working instruments, allow him to create a classification of a working “type.” Thomson takes an ownership of space and relationship in these images, and we sense hierarchies created and maintained by the photographer. The chimney sweep stands, his left side angled towards the camera, with his left hand at his waist and his right hand on his instruments of work marking him easily identified by his profession regardless of the title of the image. In the middle of the street carrying his tools, he appears to be either coming or going to work. There is an impatience to him, with his mouth open mid-speak; he does not have time for Thomson’s portrait taking and, with his tools in his hands, he is eager to get back to his duty. His work shirt is open, dark and dirty with soot, his hair and face are covered in filth, nearly black, from contamination. His clothes are dirty and torn. We understand his wages are low and his working conditions are hazardous. With urbanization, there are plenty of chimneys, equating to plenty of work leading to long hours for low wages. He has agreed to stop for one moment at Thomson’s request (perhaps for a bit of money?), but then thought better of it, as he looks away, talking, ready to move on. A more traditional chimney sweep, a small

⁷¹ John Thomson and Adolphe Smith, *Street Life in London* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1877), 26.

⁷² Sophie Howorth, *Singular Images: Essays on Remarkable Photographs* (New York: Aperture, 2005), 29.

barefoot child, leans against the wall with a sly grin on his face, as the inheritor of this hazardous, filthy occupation.

There exists a natural association between Thomson's *The Temperance Sweep* and Parr's ice cream girl. The two mirror one another in their composition, style (typing) and execution (intrusion). Both are of documentary street photography focused on England's working poor. In composition, both subject's bodies are angled with the left arm crooked at the hip. Both wear black pants and shirts topped with a pale, unbuttoned overshirt. Both figures' heads are turned toward the photographer with their right hand resting on their work instruments/station. They are surrounded by children and their facial expressions tell us they are busy at work, frustrated, impatient. Most importantly, the subject of both these photographs is not the individual but class and the lifestyle that accompanies it. Both images present the physical and emotional burden that accompanies hours, weeks, months and years of physical labor. In each image we can visualize long hours for little pay, necessary work that is overlooked, monotonous work, constant fear of unemployment and worry of how to pay expenses when one lives day to day. Both images are "types" of class created by the photographer by a specific "other" documentary lens. In both images we sense the presence of the invisible photographer, outside the frame, layering onto the image an irritating and unwelcome intrusion. Both photographers create an "other" by capturing the moment of their trespassing.

A photograph by the French photographer Charles Negre, a contemporary of Thomson, serves as a comparison to *The Temperance Sweep* in the same manner that Waplington and Graham serve for Parr. Negre's image *Chimney Sweeps Walking* (1852) is of the same topic but from an altogether different lens (Fig. 11). Images of chimney

sweeps in the nineteenth century were not particularly popular, making both these images all that much more intriguing as social documentary.⁷³ While chimney sweeps were common, they were not considered particularly aesthetically pleasing. Negre styles a symmetrical composition, an atmospheric vision and a sensitive narrative. The three young boys' faces are hidden thereby marking them by their physical bodies as instruments of labor. The foggy atmosphere delivers a romantic, even nostalgic, air of dreamy childhood. The clean, balanced composition lends a peaceful air of quiet streets of Paris in the early mornings. This is all a stark contrast to Thomson's style of a direct, anthropological approach combined with sharp details that deliver dramatic messages of poverty that layer a message of fearfulness, anxiety and cold pity. This comparison of Thomson, with his harsh, direct lens, and his contemporary Negre, with his soft, nostalgic lens, further enables us to diagnose the similarities between Thomson and Parr's particular lens.

Other Thomson and Parr comparisons even further solidify the persistence of a visual colonial lineage. While there are no seascapes here, Thomson's London and Parr's New Brighton converse in their street images of young, working class families. In a side-by-side comparison it is not difficult to find similarities in subject, style, composition and visual narrative. Thomson's *'Hookey Alf', of Whitechapel* is an excellent example of the photographer's happy-go-lucky characterization of the working poor in London and forms a natural comparison to Parr's image we have already seen and examined (Fig. 12). Both "street photography" images are captured in bright, outdoor, common, crowded

⁷³ I rely on Mary Warner Marien's visual analysis of Negre's image here, while the comparison with Thomson is my own. Located in Sophie Howarth's *Singular Images: Essays on Remarkable Photographs*, 25.

areas depicting English family social life. The styles are both traditional documentary in that they are straight-on, and concerned with photography as a document, that is, a “fact” by direct observation.⁷⁴ The subject of both images is not the new mother but the poverty that she is ensconced in. The photographers are concerned with individualism, as documentarians, both photographers seek the systems and operations in which the people in their images are subjected. The people that their cameras are trained upon are players in a vastly complicated class system. These working-class families are “typed” by the abundance of surrounding filth and other signifiers of poverty. Thomson is keen to capture the little girl in profile with her dirty dress and unkempt hair just as Parr must include piles of trash washed up in the water. Thomson’s image of Hookey Alf, an epileptic man who lost his left hand in an accident and has been replaced by a hook, is a clearly sensational inclusion on Thomson’s part indicating the violence and atrocities attached to poverty.⁷⁵ The accompanying text by Smith informs us that the mother here is a “woman of the people” and “early acclimatizes her infant to the fumes of tobacco and alcohol.”⁷⁶ In the same manner, Parr delivers us a mother drowning in trash and responsibilities with an “amputated” (ineffectual) man at her side. As with Thomson’s mother, the woman carefully attends to her child, however, the forces of poverty and the woman’s economic condition predetermine the life of the child to be one of considerable strife. Both images deliver a visual narrative that unravels years into the future of the baby and the photographer guides us by the hand as we develop a pessimistic, gloomy destiny for the child. A second comparison yields similar findings: *Thomson’s Street*

⁷⁴ Julian Stallabrass, introduction to *Documentary* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2013), 14.

⁷⁵ Thomson and Smith, *Street Life*, 107.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

Floods in Lambeth produces a comparable vision to Parr's work (Fig. 13). Both images present generational families, struggling, in the street, tete-a-tete. The worried faces of the young mothers and fathers, with several surrounding mouths to feed, pull at the viewers' emotions while engrossing us in their narratives of stress and strain. Thomson write the accompanying text to the image, and he compares Lambeth to (the entirety of) China:

In China, the people get used to floods, simply because they know that river embankments are costly, and not likely to be erected. The Chinese, some of them, construct their houses to meet emergencies. I have heard a Chinamen boast that the mud cabin was the fittest abode for man. In case of flood, it settles down over the furniture, keeps it together, and forms a mound upon which the family may sit and fish until the flood abates. When the waters have subsided, the owner, with his own hands, erected his house anew, and calmly awaits the advent of another flood. In Lambeth the conditions, at present at least, are altogether different. There are no mud huts and no wholesome fish in the wats of the Thames. Nor when the waters recede are the conditions so favorable to the maintenance of health. The high tides have left a trail of misery behind, and in thousands of low-lying tenements, a damp, noxious, fever-breeding atmosphere.⁷⁷

Thomson has shown London locals to be in much more dire situations than the Chinese, which we readers understand as the worst-of-worst situations. While constructing a “noble savage” who, naturally disposed to the wild destruction of life, does not mind his home wrecked, the London natives, accustomed to a more “civilized” world, find themselves homeless and exposed to sickness. Thomson tells us the woman with her baby in the middle of the image is from the country:

They are country folks tempted into the town by the hope of higher wages. The husband is a horse keeper whose working hours are from four o'clock in the morning to eight o'clock at night...his wages are twenty-five shillings weekly...the woman is a skilled lace-maker. She used to work at home with her pillow, pins, and bobbins, but being unable to find a market in the neighborhood for her fine wares, she had discontinued working.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 19.

This passage, along with the corresponding image, recalls Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973), in which Williams breaks apart the widespread myth of an English Arcadia.⁷⁹ This family speaks volumes of their own Industrial Revolution in which they must flee their home in the country to find work in the city, only to arrive and find no work, rampant disease and flooding. Parr's same working-class subjects complete this visual cycle when they are not able to find work among the harsh landscape of the Post-Industrial North. Typical of Thomson and Parr's imagery, we cannot help but stare, voyeuristically, at the poor "types" created from signals of sensationalism that exist in poverty, such as, in Thomson's case, filthy clothes, numerous children, men with no work, worried expressions; and in Parr's case, bad tattoos, outdated second-hand prams, inexpensive vacations, worried expressions, numerous children.

When the journalist Smith writes, "In this manner Dickens acquired his marvelous stores of material and knowledge of the people..." he lends us evidence that these sensational "characters" are sought out and determined as "types" in the historical "documentation" of Victorian England.⁸⁰ The search for visual "types" and "characters," a preference towards those embroiled in class struggle and poverty, combined with a reliance on "straight" street photography as well as more than a dash of humor and sensation thrown in the mix, all heartily reveals Parr as a firm descendant of Thomson.

Parr has never directly referenced colonial photography as an influence, nor does he claim to have an interest in nineteenth century photography.⁸¹ However, we are able to assess his knowledge on the topic from his encyclopedic, historical three volume set, *The*

⁷⁹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto, Windus and Spokesman), 1973.

⁸⁰ Thomson and Smith, *Street Life*, 108.

⁸¹ Martin Parr in discussion with the author, Houston, February 26, 2021.

Photobook: A History (2014). Parr, along with writer and fellow photographer Gerry Badger, compiled a global assessment of the most influential and important photobooks published. Naturally, nineteenth century photography fares quite brilliantly in the first volume that includes three of Thomson's collections: *Foochow and the River Min* (1873), *Illustrations of China and Its People* (1874) and *Street Life in London* (1877). When writing about his China photographs, Badger says of the images, "Thomson's Chinese pictures display the reserve and dispassionate objectivity of the European traveler, but that being said, his images display more empathy than most in the Orientalist vein."⁸² Badger acknowledges the particular "other" lens when describing Thomson's point of view, but he steers clear of making any direct colonialist connections in his text. The association made between Thomson and "the Orientalist" is keen. If Thomson does seem to exert "more empathy" than others, it is that carefully crafted lens of empathetic sensationalism that precisely enticed Victorian viewers to buy these collections. Also, if Thomson is the empathetic Orientalist, this description forms a striking site of evidence for the origins of Parr's own "othering."⁸³ In Volume III of *The Photobook: A History* Parr has chosen Pieter Hugo's stunning collection *The Hyena & Other Men* under the chapter title "Looking at Ourselves."⁸⁴ Describing the Nigerian men who domesticate and parade Hyenas and other wild animals as a source of income, Badger writes,

In photographing these people scratching a precarious living on the fringes of Nigerian society, South African photographer Pieter Hugo had to tread a fine line between empathy and exploitation, social interest and voyeurism, as well as fending off questions about photographing the "other." His carefully neutral style

⁸² Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, *The Photobook: A History, Volume 1* (London: Phaidon Press, 2004), 32.

⁸³ The three volumes of *The Photobook: A History* has text written by Badger and photobooks curated by Parr.

⁸⁴ Pieter Hugo, *The Hyena & Other Men*, Pieter Hugo.

of portraiture, with the colour saturation turned down, attempts to eliminate any sensationalist aspects, and in this he is largely successful.⁸⁵

In this writing on Hugo, Badger could easily be referring to Parr's reception from *The Last Resort*. Through this passage, we can see that Badger and Parr are quite aware of the contemporary "other" and its place in color photography, as well as interpreting the concept as something to be *fended off instead* of engaging with, learning from and growing alongside. The images from *The Hyena & Other Men* are deeply tense and somber photographs depicting struggles with hierarchies of power, questions of who is allowed to be humanized, questions of who is the more colonized--men or beasts and point to the visible and invisible hierarchies of colonization. Badger tells the reader that the photographer is "successful" because his color is muted, not vivid, with the hushed color mitigating harsh realities, anxieties and social issues at stake in these images. The comprehensive photographic history, from its origin until today, that is excavated throughout the inclusive three volumes of *The Photobook: A History* alleviates doubt as to Parr's awareness of photographic history, colonial photography and the "other".

Naturally, the study of colonial photography has transformed in the nearly two hundred years since the genesis of photography itself, and yet we find much of the original colonial intent remains, to only be repurposed into a contemporary race, class and gender dialectic that appear in new, distinct forms. Parr's contemporaries in the 1980s were highlighting and forefronting these legacies, as the beginnings of identity politics, cultural studies and semiotics spread throughout the visual industries. This has led to the understanding that the practice of seeing colonially has proven a powerful, persistent stamp on our visual psyches. At the same time Parr was capturing images of

⁸⁵ Parr and Badger, *The Photobook: Volume III*, 240.

the working poor that would become *The Last Resort*, the British scholar Stuart Hall was publishing “The Crisis of Labourism” (1984) in which he decries the failure of the Labour Party during the Thatcher years.⁸⁶ In the early 1980s Hall was developing his ideas that would form the founding scholarship of a new field of Cultural Studies, thus elevating the interrogation of popular culture, vernacular imagery and cultural ephemera into the sphere of high-minded scholarship. Hall, along with Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, developed the field of Cultural Studies headquartered in Birmingham, a close Northern England proximity to Parr. Elongating the discourse of postcolonial studies into the arena of popular culture, Hall investigates the insidious effects of colonial imagery on viewership identity through coding and signs that benefit corporate systems that deploy racist, classist and gendered hierarchies of oppression. Hall reveals how political, economic and social forces converge within mass media to program “normative” messages within viewers and our work is to de-code the systems that seek to place outdated and oppressive identities upon us for others’ gain. Much of Hall’s scholarship finds its foundation in Said’s *Orientalism* and Roland Barthes’ work in semiotics.⁸⁷ Previously, popular culture was presumed as tasteless and irrelevant to significant scholarship, yet Hall made it apparent that photography, advertising, magazines, pop music, films, soap operas, comics, nightly news, and in fact all of the signs we receive and ingest, work to imbed within our psyches individually and collectively. Hall insisted that we all know that culture is not neutral ground, culture is

⁸⁶ Stuart Hall, “The Crisis of Labourism,” in *Selected Political Writings*, ed. Davison, Featherstone, Rustin, Schwarz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 207.

⁸⁷ Said mentions Hall twice in his later *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) as a contemporary voice of “anti-imperial resistance”.

political.⁸⁸ Parr and Hall, being of the same time and place--the working-class North of Liverpool and Birmingham, respectively--display prominent similarities. These likenesses involve Hall releasing theoretical writings followed by Parr superseding with a similar project that seems to reinterpret Hall's scholarship into visual display.

To illustrate these similarities, I will begin with Hall's investigation of the "contemporary other" in his essay "The Spectacle of the Other" (1997), a focus upon the Black body in contemporary British society, while also addressing gender and class intersectionalities.⁸⁹ The concern of the "other" is one of representation, and more specifically, who gets to control it, how it is structured, and for what purposes. Representation is mostly used as a tool by systems of power that seek a specific goal. Those systems require a hegemony of belief that in turn creates an "other" and while these systems may visually appear invisible, they are ubiquitous and have continued a lineage of racial, gendered and class "othering" that endures even in contemporary imagery. This requires an un-learning, a decoding in order to reposition the "other" into a more neutral and equal ground. This representation, used by the systems, requires many layers, some simple and direct and some the viewer will (knowingly or unknowingly) infer, imagine, and interpret. Hall explains how representation is never straightforward:

The same photo can carry several, quite different, sometimes diametrically opposite meanings...many meanings are potential within the photo. But there is no one, true meaning. Meaning 'floats'. It cannot be finally fixed. However, attempting to 'fix' it is the work of a representational practice, which intervenes in the many potential meanings of an image in an attempt to privilege one.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Hua Hsu, "Stuart Hall and the Rise of Cultural Studies," *The New Yorker*, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/stuart-hall-and-the-rise-of-cultural-studies?source=search_google_dsa_paid&gclid=Cj0KCQjw7pKFBhDUARIsAFUoMDYOSPykQtv1lofmEd4J8e7J8r5gGdsQgvvBJ3jEhZQFU4doHuxhz0caAi9IEALw_wcB

⁸⁹ Stuart Hall, et al., *Representation* (London: Sage Publications, 2013), 215.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.

As we have seen, Parr's critics cited a "contemporary othering" as a consistent theme throughout his career. With the two men in such spatial and temporal proximity, and the sharing of interests in medium (one the philosopher and the other the craftsman), as well as direct engagement with "other" as subject matter, it begs the question of knowledge and influence.

Hall fought doggedly against Thatcher's economic policies of austerity, coining the term "Thatcherism" to encapsulate her obliteration of three decades of Keynesian public policy that led to disenfranchisement of lower working classes through cuts to social welfare while boosting the upper class through tax cuts on the wealthy.⁹¹ Thatcher's strict, stubborn tactics, her own form of brutal modernization, drove the formerly respected British working class to humiliation and poverty. As a Marxist, Hall strove to decode Thatcher's policies for those around him, the immigrant class that was adversely affected especially in the North. In order to elucidate his theories Hall frequently used the phrase "common sense" as an understanding of the Right's attempts at a carefully crafted conservative social hegemony that sought to surreptitiously undermine any unique, visible, individualism within peripheral groups. He used the phrase "common sense" repeatedly in his political writings and speeches as early as 1979's popular essay "The Great Moving Right Show" and into 2011's "The Neo-Liberal Revolution."⁹² In 1999 Parr exhibited his most unusual and surprising collection titled *Common Sense* (1995-1999). The exhibit was unusual for several reasons. It was shown globally in forty-one venues in seventeen countries around the world simultaneously, breaking the Guinness Book of World Records by canvassing the globe with his billboard

⁹¹ Hall, *Selected Political Writings*, 180.

⁹² Ibid.

sized images of a grotesque European hegemony. Moreover, the collection was unlike anything Parr had created before; gone are the seascapes and British clichés to be replaced with a misanthropic vision of European hegemony at the turn of the millennium. Parr, a frequent traveler, sensed and captured an ominous, dull, yet delightfully photogenic “Americanization” among a not-so-distant European continent that prided itself on its individual national cultures and traditions. *Common Sense* is Parr’s most astringent, critical voice yet. Displayed extra-large and repulsively attractive, the images of *Common Sense* cemented Parr’s position as an “art” photographer as well as a documentarian. Interestingly, Hall had released an essay, only a few years prior in 1997, “The Local and the Global: Ideas of Global Hegemony.”⁹³

Another phrase utilized by Hall was the paradoxical, liminal phrase “strange and familiar,” that particular flux-state that defines “otherness.” The concept is original to Said, where in *Orientalism* he proclaims, “Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the *familiar* and the *strange* [my italics].”⁹⁴ Familiar and strange in relationship with one another compose a defining element of the “other” and Said’s familiar and strange relationship is yet another construction of *Orientalism*’s binaries of West and East; Occident and Orient; Us and Other. The two states, in relation to one another, compile a hybrid-space where a person belongs and yet will never belong. In perverse colonial reasoning, the familiar and strange function in tandem in order for colonial powers to “know” (familiar) the “other” (strange). The “other” was to be collected, studied and categorized, thereby creating an

⁹³ Stuart Hall, “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity,” in *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, edited by Anthony King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 19.

⁹⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 72.

intimacy with the once alien. This created paradox, invented one that was “known” logically but was always to remain an unknown. Hall’s autobiography, posthumously released in 2017, yet in progress for over twenty years, is titled *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*.⁹⁵ The paradox, and its origin in the “other”, was so intimate to Hall as for him to use it as a title for his life’s narrative. Relatedly, in 2016 Parr, along with Alona Pardo, curated a photography exhibition at the Barbican of carefully chosen documentary photographs of Britain and the British captured by non-British photographers. This clever concept allowed viewers to access an outsider’s vision of their homeland. Entitled *Strange and Familiar: Britain as Revealed by International Photographers*, Parr and Pardo included canonical photographers such as Robert Frank, Paul Strand, Gary Winogrand, Henri Cartier-Bresson, among many others. The exhibit’s subject was undoubtedly Britain, but the inclusion of the alien interlocutor created a reversal in which Britain becomes the “other” and the exhibit reveals itself as equally interested in those on the outside looking in. The more traditional British “closed circuit” documentary lens--the English capturing the English and viewed by the English--is opened for wider interpretation allowing an opportunity for the British to view *themselves* as “strange.” An introduction by David Chandler tells us the “binding theme” of the exhibition was the travel experiences of Robert Frank and Henri Cartier-Bresson where “both saw contact with what was unfamiliar to them as a vital source of creative stimulation and inspiration”.⁹⁶ Chandler declares the unifying message of the exhibit to be the clear-eyed, pure vision that accompanies foreign travel. Yet, the genesis of this

⁹⁵ Bill Schwartz, Hutchins Center for African and African American Studies, <https://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/people/bill-schwarz>

⁹⁶ Martin Parr and Alona Pardo, *Strange and Familiar: Britain as Revealed by International Photographers* (London: Prestel Publishing, 2106), 18.

magnetic relationship of “familiar and strange,” Said’s understanding of an uncanny distance and intimacy and how this concept was used by colonizing nations as a tactic to control foreign peoples and lands, is not acknowledged.

Similarly, Parr has always held admiration for the pioneering British color photographer Peter Mitchell. Mitchell’s particular 1979 exhibit, *A New Refutation of the Viking IV Space Mission*, was the first English showing of color documentary photography. The collection was predicated upon an alien visitor’s photographs of Leeds or how an actual space-alien would perceive Northern England.⁹⁷ In order to impress the alien-vision upon viewers, Mitchell had the images framed with black scientific charting and interspersed with images of Mars’ surface. The show made a great impression on Parr, as color photography was at that time strictly associated with America. Mitchell’s innovative color vision has been largely overlooked in British documentary studies and therefore in 2018 Parr helped to issue a re-release of the collection, this time re-named, *Strangely Familiar*. The book was re-released with a new title by Parr and with Mitchell’s original, playful alien format gone, now in a strictly traditional documentary style.

Hall was excavating and elevating previously overlooked cultural creations such as advertising, vernacular photography, material objects and soap operas, Parr was working in these same areas with much success. Parr has worked extensively from the beginning of his career in advertising, he is an avid collector of vernacular objects of British distinction and global esoteric subject matter and has frequently used the work of soap operas, their narratives and visuals, in his work. After retiring from academic life in

⁹⁷ Peter Mitchell, “Strangely Familiar,” <https://strangelyfamiliar.co.uk/>

1997, Hall held a special interest in photography and became chair to his own photographic foundation, Autograph ABP (Association of Black Photographers) as well as The Institute for International Visual Arts. The Stuart Hall Foundation was begun in 2015 by Hall's family and friends after his death in 2014. Parr established the Martin Parr Foundation after his retirement as president from Magnum in 2017.

Parr's awareness of Hall is factually uncertain. However, it seems nearly impossible that Parr could have avoided Hall's presence as a constant appearance on television, radio and all media in 1980s England.⁹⁸ As someone working in media himself and finding his visual voice around that same time, Parr would have been smart to consider Hall's work and many signs point that he did: Parr's "contemporary othering", the disdain of Thatcher's economic policies, the allegiance to the phrase "strange and familiar," the use of the term "common sense" as a title for a project critiquing hegemony, the establishing a photographic Foundation in Northern England, and the working in and continuously assessing wide ranges of popular media. These noteworthy connections indicate that, despite his defenders' explicit denials, Parr has been devotedly engaged in the domain of the "other" his entire career; is consistently functioning within it; and in many cases has used it to marvelous and profitable effect.

⁹⁸ Hsu, "Stuart Hall".

Colonial Still Lives

Long before the advent of photography, painting was the most common form of representation that enabled a close approximation to “truth” in a time when the fashion in Western societies was for authentic representation of life around them. Still life painting gained popularity from its Netherlandish origins and spread throughout Europe, as global networks, trade and colonialism expanded. As these global grids grew in size and power, canvases themselves expanded, reflecting the increased desires and accumulations of imported resources.⁹⁹ Another parallel interpretation of the early still life is that of a *memento mori*, that opulent reminder of the life-death cycle with all of its triumphs and defeats spread out in a visual buffet. In his book on the operations of photography, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes suggests that inherent in photography is the past (*this has been*) and the future (*this will be*), but never the present.¹⁰⁰ Similar to still life painting, the photograph itself is an inherent expression of the cycle of life. For Barthes, death is pervasive in photography and begs the question “...why is it that I am alive *here and now*?” which is the essence of the *memento mori* that the photograph produces so well.¹⁰¹ We see that still life has historically been used as a visual metaphor for the cycle of life, and photography is a mechanism that is organically in discourse with the cycle of life. Therefore, still life and photography inherently possess a capacity and desire to communicate similar messages, therefore, when used in union, these two methods of representation are capable of producing powerful communications concerning great cycles within small universes full with epic successes and failures.

⁹⁹ Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade*, 86.

¹⁰⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 96.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

As reviewed above, the British photographer John Thomson created landscape and ethnographical photography taken in service of the empire, conducting most of his considerable work throughout Asia. However, less scholarship has been conducted on his few still life photographs that he produced within Asia through the years 1869-1872. With only four available still life photographs from his time spent in Asia, these images form an area of needed study.¹⁰² Similarly, Parr is a photographer with well-known work in documentary and portraiture, however, he has produced two volumes of still life works, *7 Colonial Still Lives* (2005), and *7 Communist Still Lives* (2003), each containing only a scant seven images each.¹⁰³ Parr's volume of colonial photography, like Thomson's, was also produced in Asia and has garnered no scholarship. Through comparing and contrasting the still life photography of Thomson and Parr, I am further able to confirm Parr's colonial lens, yet I will also examine how, in his still life work, the images significantly differ from traditional aims of colonial photography.

Thomson certainly would have been familiar with those English photographers before him who experimented with the natural still life genre such as Henry Fox Talbot, from as early as 1835, and Roger Fenton from 1850. Both earlier photographers used the genre of still life in order to display an odd mixture of local and "exotic" fruits and flora. These early photographs nearly always contained a centrally placed pineapple, as Victorians found a special delight in that unique, tropical fruit. Naturally, Thomson knew his natural history images would be of use to Imperial geographers, scientists and

¹⁰² Two still lifes are from Hong Kong, another from "China" and another from "Vietnam". In 1921, Thomson sold all of his negatives to Sir Henry Wellcome who later formed the Wellcome Museum and Library in London that now houses the Thomson collection. James Ryan considers this photograph and its colonial origins only briefly in his text *Picturing Empire*.

¹⁰³ In the interview, Parr reminded me there is another in his Nazraeli series, *7 Cups of Tea* (2012), which I do not examine here, as it does not directly relate to colonial ideology.

anthropologists and his still life photographs are specifically for that purpose. When photographing in China, Thomson understood the surrounding natural elements, such as flowers, fruits and leaves, as part of his surveillance operation to be considered by the British in their future attempts at usurpation. Natural agricultural resources, one of the original aims of global colonial expansion, such as fruits, vegetables, tobacco, sugar and tea, required access to geography. These small, simple still life photographs project the larger understanding that if natural resources were the objective, control of land and labor (people) would be needed.

A close examination of Thomson's still life, *The Fruits of China* (1873-74) can help us better understand Britain's (and Thomson's) colonial objectives (Fig. 14). The subject of Thomson's photograph is not "exotic" fruit but colonial possession, and in this way, Thomson is seeing colonially, and he invites all viewers (most likely British members of the Royal Geographical Society) to do so as well. As with most of Thomson's images, the photograph is carefully and deliberately staged. The elements are star fruit, pomegranate, lychee, kumquat or longan, possibly mango, and that strange fruit much loved by the Victorians, a pineapple. Naturally, the composition is a traditional Dutch configuration, a conscious effort, so that, regardless of the "exotic" items, the photograph can easily be "read" by a European eye. The pineapple is centered, because of its aesthetically curious and majestic nature, the most oddly "exotic" and prized by British elites of the era, rendering it a luxury object. The composition flows diagonally from high right, where the mass of leafy kumquats is suspended by a visible apparatus in the upper right corner. From here, the overall composition spills downward left with all the elements pouring outward, opening up, inviting the viewer into the image to partake

in this feast of “exotic” luxuries. At the right, a pomegranate and lychee are peeled, opened and displayed. Even the seeds, that essential component of reproduction, are splayed and ready for consumption or taking.

In a nearly sexual enactment, it is China that lays herself bare for the English viewer to overtake. These “exotic” fruits create an intrigue and wonder that, as Oriental objects, naturally breed desire in the British imagination. In Thomson’s image there is no decay, only the perfect stage of ripeness for immediate consumption. The glass of wine is the only non-fruit, non-Asian element and it is front and center. The wine and the glass itself are of European descent making for a jarring juxtaposition. Without the wine and the glass, an image of solely “exotic” fruits would communicate something entirely different: an autonomous, independent Chinese banquet, quiet, beautiful in its solitary peacefulness, suggesting a serenity, naturalness, that the viewer may instinctively want to observe but not disturb. But the inclusion of the wine glass and the wine, centered, imposes a European presence. The glass is ready to be drunk and the viewer is asked to not simply look, but to participate, to drink in all of China. The inclusion of the wine glass is an active incursion of the European into the Chinese space, to partake, participate, and ultimately familiarize themselves with that foreign land and its resources with the ultimate objective of possession, ownership and consumption. In the imaginative practice of colonial photography, the viewer is only one step removed from the conquering and possessing of land itself. Thomson’s still life photographs operate as an advertisement, a subliminal colonial propaganda, to Victorian viewers. Thomson’s image of “the fruits of empire” was a thinly veiled directive to sympathetic colonialists' home in Britain. It was a quiet promotion of colonialist values requiring horrific means to fulfill.

Thomson's image is testament to the hidden, coded, subversive forms of visual communication that colonial powers were able to transmit without revealing their intentions and the actions required to fulfill them. Thomson takes pains to hide, smuggling in his actual message through visual clues, to his cohort who are able to "read" it. It can only be properly "read" by the European familiar with first, the traditional form of European still life imagery and secondly, colonialism's agenda. Thomson's tactics would have been fully understood by the colonial viewer and still life was the ideal choice of genre as it historically conceals more than it reveals. In his allegory, Thomson is seeing colonially and is able, in a simple image of fruits, to stealthily conceal the true horrors of the system of Imperialism, while simultaneously revealing all the imaginative possibilities, resources, goods, wealth and luxuries available to a victorious empire.

Photography, as a technology, is able to complete to the fullest extent what Dutch still life wanted to achieve: delivering excruciating, scientifically precise, perfectly rendered details that would celebrate the fetishism of the object and the capitalist gains of the wealthy. Granted, photography lacks the painterly craftsmanship of the seventeenth century canvases, and the early photography of John Thomson, Henry Fox-Talbot and Roger Fenton's still lifes are hardly the mesmerizing feats of craftsmanship of Dutch canvases. Not only are the photographs devoid of color, a necessary ingredient to bring alive the commodities of still life, but the scale of the small black and white photograph could not compete with the grandiosity of many Dutch paintings. However, as photography technologies evolved, and new photographic styles emerged, still life photographic images would be better equipped to challenge the intentions of the Dutch masters. One such early experimentalist of a new still lifestyle was the British artist,

Keith Arnatt, in his series of gracefully enchanting photographs, *Pictures from a Rubbish Tip* (1988-1989), reminiscent of the most sublime of Dutch still lifes (Fig. 15). The photographs contain elements of traditional still life such as fruits, flowers and various food-stuffs, yet, instead of the complete, semi-alive objects meant to seduce us, Arnatt's photographs are of trash heaps. If the glossy traditional Dutch still life is the "before" image, perfectly poised and desirous edibles awaiting our consumption, then Arnatt's hazy, ambiguous images are the "after" image of the essential still life buffet having been devoured and tossed out. Arnatt probes the traditional still life supply chain and has begun at the end, exposing capitalisms, and its endless commodities, ultimate destination-the dump. The usual objects and goods are displayed in their own aftermath, the fetishism disappeared, exposing society's overconsumption as well as its lack of systems of sustainability.¹⁰⁴ Arnatt explored the detritus of mass consumption and globalization much earlier than Parr adopted these subjects as serious areas of study, arguably beginning with the gruesome *Common Sense* (1999). However, this generation brought forth fresh viewings in still life that challenge how we perceive past iterations of the genre, both paintings and photographs, and provoke new interpretations of our contemporary world.

Over one hundred years after Thomson's still life delivered the advertisement of Britain's colonial ambitions, Parr's still life images convey the indelible results of those ambitions. Parr's still life *Colombo, 2004* again from the collection *7 Colonial Still Lifes* (2005) inspects that most awful of confections, fruitcake (Fig. 16). Thomson's "fruits of empire" have become dried up, nutrition-less, sugary nuggets overly preserved to a point

¹⁰⁴ David Mellor, "Romances of Decay, Elegies for the Future," in *British Photography* (New York: Aperture, 1988), 66.

of crystalized petrification. In a saturated, kaleidoscopic glow, Parr delivers an advertising-esque image of advertising. Cake boxes with images of cake. A photo of photos. A fragment of fragments. A still life image of images of still lifes, as if the two are looking back at one another in a hall of mirrors. Neon bright colors, like fruitcake ingredients themselves, glow on cake boxes likely stacked on a shelf in a local supermarket of Colombo, the old colonial port city in Western Sri Lanka. The middle of the photograph shows “Butter Cake,” a perennial Sri Lankan favorite. Other versions are “Tea Cake” and “Fruit Cake,” both European confections particularly popular with the British. There are several similar looking brands represented, but the “Royal” brand is of singular interest, whose logo includes the British flag, always the most direct of signals, indicating nation, loyalty, identity, history. The “Royal” brand includes each type of confection, tea cake, fruit cake and butter cake. Each cake box displays scripts from an intermix of languages of English, Tamil and Hindi. The images on the cake boxes are of apples, oranges, grapes, limes and strawberries, none of which are ingredients in fruitcake. If the outside image is meant to signal what is inside, it is a lie. The bright colors of fruitcake are also false; neon green cherries and neon red pineapple are not found in nature. Lies proliferate here, along with a multiplicity of tastes, languages and cultures, signifying the long history of exchange between the two small island nations and pointing directly to Sri Lanka’s colonial past as well as its ongoing relationship with Britain as a member of the Commonwealth. Both Thomson and Parr’s photographs investigate the resources of Asia and how those resources relate to Britain’s colonial past, present and future. Thomson’s “exotic” fruit and wine in Hong Kong is reimagined in a postmodern form by Parr’s meta-imagery of fruitcake and tea in Sri Lanka. As

Thomson's wine glass imposes the British presence into the Chinese space, Parr's teacup creates a similar intrusion, reminiscent of tea plantations of the then-British nation of Ceylon. Both artists are seeing colonially yet in vastly different terms: Thomson is looking towards the future, one gleeful with imperial triumph, and Parr is looking to the past, one rotting with imperial decay.

As mentioned before, Barthes explains how photography is a form of time suspension, a preservation of life and a staving off of death. What Parr's lens seeks is not absolute death, as Arnatt so poetically expresses in his final trash heaps, but a persistent hunger for preservation. Regardless of decay and inevitable death, both of which still life and photography so perfectly convey, by the mid-twentieth century, after decades of British colonies fighting for independence, the British empire had been mostly reduced to the global Commonwealth. Rather than be extinguished entirely, it seeks to preserve itself in myriad calculating and elusive tactics, and it is these small, desperate occasions upon which Parr trains his lens. Therefore, it is the inclusion of fruitcake--that particular dessert that cheats time in its unreasonable longevity of decades (even centuries!) due to specific routine acts of preservation--which finely illustrates Parr's ceaseless search for the remnants of empire and the evidence of its own illogical, madcap safeguarding.

Illogical foods, and the people who eat them, are a standard theme of Parr's work. Fruitcake is a kitschy, holiday, ridiculous, boundary-confusing, awkward food and therefore fruitcake is the perfect allegory for Parr. Parr's resume contains an extensive chronicling of awkward consumption: cupcakes with faces of the Royal prince (Royal subjects eating the prince), luxury *petit fours* decorated like shiny, pink pigs (fat, pink English people eating sugary, pink piggies and gaining weight), supermarket bananas

wrapped in plastic (bananas have a natural barrier already). Fruitcake is the ultimate food joke. Much like the empire itself, fruitcake lives past its prime, while in obvious states of decay and is constructed to refuse submission. No one likes it, yet it proliferates; it contains little to no (nutritional) value and therefore it is itself an inherent irony; hardly “fruit” and hardly “cake,” it is a misnomer. Much like the Commonwealth, fruitcake is food that is confused, in flux, translated, hybridized and because it insists on convoluting the boundaries of “food” it is, by definition, abject.¹⁰⁵ Fruitcake persists mostly for a bygone generation that relates to it only through nostalgia. Much like contemporary vestiges of the British empire such as the Royal family and the Commonwealth, people like the *idea* of fruitcake, not the thing itself.

If Thomson’s *Fruits of China* was a dog-whistle to the colonial planners of the Royal Geographic Society, he was in service to a highly structured system of visual manipulation. I have described Thomson’s still life as an “advertisement” for colonization, with Thomson willingly deceiving viewers into complicity with the empire and its aims. Thomson’s still life was not simply a promotion, the image was a seductive lure into an evil system based upon greed and cruelty. As I have shown in chapters one and two, Thomson’s “othering” of his own English people and the importance of his vast colonial work for the empire, formed a strong foundation for British documentary photography that Parr, in his devotion to documentary work, consciously or unconsciously, continues. However, the two photographers’ still life works display another legacy of vision, another highly structured system of visual manipulation, one that Parr is definitely conscious of utilizing: advertising.

¹⁰⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 5.

Across time, seeing colonially has remained a photographic act, while the corporate head may have shifted. The act of seeing colonially is still performed by a photographer carefully and calculatingly framing the view, in order to deliver a covert message to largely unknowing (and a few knowing) viewers for the purpose of entrenching (across time and space) the beliefs of a particular system that serves to benefit and enrich the top few while manipulating and oppressing the bottom many. As I have mentioned, color photography only became ubiquitous within the scope of early advertising. One such example is the American advertising photographer Victor Keppler was an early example of mastering color photography in corporate advertising. Keppler, in New York City in the midst of the “Mad men” craze, was a master of photographic manipulation. He was the first to combine the seriousness and the authenticity associated with black and white documentary photography with corporate advertising for the purpose of delivering a veneer of “truth” to the campaigns while simultaneously appealing to “common people”.¹⁰⁶ These documentary images employed “real” workers with all of their flaws, not models, in order to establish trustworthiness with viewers. Some of Keppler’s more lucrative campaigns involved food. An image from 1950, titled *Summer Fun* is from Keppler’s *repertoire* of his early color work in food still lifes (Fig. 17). This campaign for Sealtest Ice Cream was shot in March with no fresh fruit available in New York City. In order to achieve his vision, get the message across and sell the product, this image was strategically designed and painstakingly assembled. Keppler reveals the fruit in the image was assembled from the far reaches of the globe consisting of: “Peaches from Chile, pears from Africa, pineapples from Hawaii, honeydews from

¹⁰⁶ Victor Keppler, *Man + Camera* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1970), 55.

Brazil, strawberries from a local greenhouse...blackberries, loganberries and raspberries were selected from frozen packages.”¹⁰⁷ The various fruits were flown into New York specifically for the photoshoot, exemplifying the global needs and the priceless efforts of each photography campaign and the corporations themselves.

Stuart Hall pinpoints advertising as that direct invasion formed from a colonial genesis. Advertising is a cruel system of class manipulation, ironically, used to condition the worker into buying the objects of their own making.¹⁰⁸ Advertising always played a powerful role in Hall’s deep investigation of his role in The New Left, used as an unseen, stealth weapon in the capitalist machine.¹⁰⁹ Hall passionately declares, “advertising is a debased art...halfway between degraded salesmanship and bastard poetry.”¹¹⁰ We are the victim of the advertiser, dazzled by the language of the image and its promises.

Advertising is specifically formulated to simultaneously expose and hide, deliver and conceal. The advertising image’s ability to frame a simple, direct, cheerful image while subversively encoding it with absent, secret demands, vile expectations and tricky manipulations that stimulate specific actions that directly undermine and disempower the wider population is nothing short of brilliant. Used by British colonialists, Nazi propagandists and late capitalist multinational corporations alike, advertising (and its sister, propaganda) is a highly organized system of manipulation with a long history of attempts to sell a product or an ideology to someone who does not need it, likely does not want it, and is subject to a power greater than themselves.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 143.

¹⁰⁸ Hall, *Selected Political Writings*, 36.

¹⁰⁹ Hall has been accused (by Terry Eagleton and others) of taking ideas of others without proper citation, repackaging them and using them as his own. Intriguingly, so has Parr.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 62.

While Thomson's *Fruits of China* and Keppler's *Summer Fun* may appear to be quite different images made for different purposes, they are, in fact, in the service of similar, intertwined ideologies: the global systems of empire and capitalism. Thomson captures his fruit with specific hopes of global expansion resulting in global domination, regardless and dismissive of the horrors incurred at the expense of the Chinese, and always under a guise of what is best for the common people. Likewise, Keppler captures his fruit with specific hopes of corporate-capitalist global expansion with the same outcomes as Thomson. The two photographers' images easily and cheerfully conceal the ruthless competition, endless greed and inhumane practices, all requiring an essential cruelty.

Parr deftly takes visual lessons from the techniques of colonial photography and advertising and both their practices of "othering," however, in his still life photography, he is attempting something unique and perhaps even more complex. Parr has elucidated in several interviews, "I'm the antidote to propaganda."¹¹¹ Parr does not reveal any further explanations, yet I believe his visual objectives are more complicated than the catchphrase he perpetuates. In his still life imagery, Parr employs the *techniques*, the methods, of advertising and propaganda, in order to subversively *expose* the original propagandistic message. In these still lifes, Parr serves as a double agent, through space and time, penetrating the "enemy" in order to unmask long-hidden truths.

Just as a Dutch still life painting obscures the horrors of the ship's six-month voyage braving pirates, disease, starvation, enslavement and weather, similar horrors are

¹¹¹ Marie Gautier, "'I'm the antidote to propaganda': A Conversation with Martin Parr," *Le Cle*, 2012, <http://cle.ens-lyon.fr/anglais/arts/photographie/i-m-the-antidote-to-propaganda-a-conversation-with-martin-parr>

deliberately absent from Thomson's still life photography. Similarly, Madison Avenue advertising campaigns purposefully eliminate the carefully constructed personal debts, feelings of unworthiness, false hopes of bought freedoms and inclusions, pressures and demands that keep money out of the pockets of "victims" in order to place money in the pockets of corporations. The operators of these systems understand the horrors to be outside the frame, while to those subject to the systems, the horrors are altogether unknown. Parr's objective, in contrast, is to upend these traditional uses of advertising and propaganda as he not only *includes* the former absences but he *illuminates* them so the viewer cannot mistake or miss the clear display of the regularly hidden message. Parr has continuously, purposefully targeted those elements traditionally excluded from a photograph such as sweat stains, pimples, spills on dresses, dirty fingernails, food in teeth, fat rolls, filthy carpets, spoiled food and chipped nail polish. In this, he is filling in the gaps of visual history, and it may not be picturesque, but that is the point, and there is a lot of un-seen history to make up for. While it seems every journalist has interpreted this purposeful inclusion-of-the-excluded as quirky *kitsch*, this is too simplistic an assessment.¹¹² While photographic practice has deliberately excluded the horrors of British imperial aims, as we have seen with the history of colonial photography, Parr has slyly been subverting advertising's objectives of hiding the ugly with the pretty, by displaying the ugly, directly under a thin veneer of the attractive. Through this, he reinserts with a covert quiet sleight of hand, while the viewer is distracted, the historical, long absent, "truth" of British imperial horrors into our consciousness, without our even noticing, thereby pulling a thread leading to the unraveling of the British long held

¹¹² Parr himself does not care for the "kitsch" assessment and deems it a "lazy" reading, which seems accurate.

insistence on global domination. When speaking about his work Parr reveals, “...I’m also interested in...showing how British society is decaying; how this once great society is falling apart.”¹¹³

The similarities between the still life’s of Thomson and Parr bring forth more intriguing questions concerning their purposes and, therefore, their identifications. Both of the still lifes are certainly identifiable in that genre, however they are captured by “documentary” photographers. Are both of these images primarily identified as “documents” of the British presence in Hong Kong and the British presence in Sri Lanka? Both images perform a function that fulfill the visions of the creation and the destruction of a major global ideology. Therefore, both still lifes enact the activities of advertising more than traditional documentary. Both photographers are luring the viewer in with seductive techniques: Thomson with abundance, “exotic” curiosities, simple design, and erotic exposure and Parr with vivid color, simple design, humor, and eye-catching oddities. Both are hiding actual historical realities behind advertising’s glossy, enchanting siren-call. Both photographers assume the viewer does not *want* to witness the atrocities and horrors of imperial conquest that the traditional documentarian (such as those of the Magnum group so opposed to Parr’s inclusion) would have diligently seized upon. It was the elite, such as those members of the RGS and Magnum who would intellectually engage in the discourse of imperialism and colonization, and willingly digest the horrendous imagery. The harsh realities of war paired with gruesome images of death are not the taste of every viewer and documentary photographic “truths” cause many to avert their eyes thereby spoiling the educational mission. How to get the “every-day” common,

¹¹³ Williams, *Martin Parr*, 158.

individual to view, digest and understand such weighty discourse? Trick them with the picturesque and “exotic” (Thomson) or the comical and odd-ball (Parr). The old Magnum guard may have initially dismissed Parr for not being “documentary” enough, however, what they failed to realize was that, through the techniques of advertising, Parr was cryptically furthering the Magnum institutional message of the atrocities of war (in Parr’s case the imperial, colonial and neo-colonial) to a far broader audience than they.

The Imperial curiosity of Parr extends further than Britain. A few years before *7 Colonial Still Lifes*, he produced from the same press and in the same style, *7 Communist Still Lifes* (2003), composed of similar simple quotidian objects and foods from multiple former Soviet colonies. Just as in *7 Colonial Still Lifes*, the images of Soviet outposts in Lithuania, Latvia and Kazakhstan, among others, allows the viewer to see colonially through a twentieth century post-Soviet colonial lens as opposed to a nineteenth century British Imperial lens. As with *7 Colonial Still Lifes*, the Soviet images contain deceptively simple objects that encompass epic historical narratives, this time of the once mammoth U.S.S.R. The twenty-first century can now understand colonization as a failed effort, and so is it with Communism.¹¹⁴ In these two short series, Parr is examining nineteenth century ideologies that grew into the twentieth century, sought global ambitions, and saw their eventual demise while retaining burnt-out vestiges of their former glories in various global outposts. A photograph of three stacked cans of pureed mango, titled *Havana, Cuba, 2000*, suggests post-Soviet realities in contemporary Cuba (Fig. 18). Three cans of pureed mango are carefully stacked in a pyramid formation upon a highly varnished brown wooden shelf, all in front of a neon-green wall. The cans’

¹¹⁴ Parr has focused energy upon neo-colonial subjects in recent years which is a ripe subject for new investigation.

labels are illustrated with cartoonish images of teddy bears with red bows seated next to large, leafy, orange mangoes. A white, blonde, baby in a diaper crawls on its knees, indicating the cans of mango are to be used as baby food. The bears and the baby give a pleasant smile, delivering a message of calm. Spanish text, presumably of ingredients and production, are mostly out of reading view.

However, upon a closer look, details emerge that complicate an easy reading. The labels are peeling, either time-worn or haphazardly attached, and one label does not actually fit the can, perhaps placed quickly or refitted. The wooden shelf is overly varnished, chipped, in need of constant repair, and appears over-used or of cheap quality. The neon green wall in this makeshift shop is too bright, trying too hard at joy or perhaps, because of the unusual choice, it was the only color available. This small, tattered display works hard to sell itself. We understand that in Cuba there are no clinically clean, brand new supermarkets with perfect surfaces, piped music, overstocked shelves, and fresh products arriving daily. In fact, in Havana, there are only three products available and they are worn, old, perhaps expired or altogether unsellable. The realities of communism seep in and we realize that this display could be formed from necessity, a black market, that someone (and their child) will go without in order to survive.

The Cuban Revolution began with the coup of 1953 and the Communist Party of Cuba was formed in 1965. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Castro determinedly vowed “socialism or death,” despite the former Soviet Bloc accounting for over 85% of its subsidized trade.¹¹⁵ Accordingly, food shortages became endemic and meager monthly rations for a miserable diet were regularly allotted at the beginning of

¹¹⁵ None, “International: Cuba, Communism, Potatoes,” *The Economist* 323, 7759 (1992): 51.

the month, leaving many families hungry by month's end. Standard rations include rice, beans, oil and sugar--bulk foods that are cheaply and easily transported and stored. Fruits and vegetables are rare, and when available are canned, not fresh, with fruits accounting for less than one percent of imports.¹¹⁶ Therefore, the image of canned mango carries inherent ironies and paradoxes: in a country where mangoes are a prolific tropical fruit, available in several species, why the need for canning them? In a land that is able to produce fresh mango ten months of the year, why does a canned mango exist? Are they meant for export to other communist or former Eastern Bloc countries (as the white, blonde baby seems to suggest), sent to the other side of the globe despite consistent domestic hunger? In a country with continuous food shortages, and a proliferation of mangoes, do the canned foods exist simply to produce the factory work that is the soul of the communist nation? All these questions point to the absurdity of canning a highly prolific, highly nutritious food in a nation of food scarcity. The only occasion for eating a canned mango in Cuba would be extreme poverty and hunger, all of which complicates the happy cartoon-child on the label.

Contemporary Cuba maintains communism as its economic foundation despite the global changes the ideology has undergone in the past decades. However, it is not communism that Parr dissects, it is Soviet Imperialism and its colonization, its decay and its desire and ability to preserve itself despite the empire's disintegration. The photobook itself contains only one nation that is actually communist, that is Cuba, while the others are post-Soviet satellite colonies. The diminishment of the Soviet Union is a photographic project Parr has generously engaged in throughout his career, specifically

¹¹⁶ John Butler, *The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the World Food Markets* (New York: Praeger, 1964), 15.

his popular images of the first Moscow McDonald's in 1990 at the moment communism is dissolving.¹¹⁷ The images convey an air of bewildered joy and a sense of intrigue as to what happens next. Through all the neon-banality, the still life images consistently deliver an interest in the end of empire and the dregs of a stubborn persistence.

With the Cuban mango, preservation is seen in the ironies of the processed and highly preserved canned fruit. The canned mango implies communism's tight hold against all odds, and these effects on families, in particular, the children of Cuba. A nutritious, delicious, indigenous treat such as mango, canned and locked away, reveal harsh realities of communist food scarcities, governmental mismanagements and horrible ironies of Communist policies. The cans also point to a lack of traditional baby food and milk. The best of local foods is locked away, likely to be exported to communist China, as local populations battle malnutrition.

In the language of advertising, neon colors of orange and green lure us in, and cheerful teddy bears and babies deliver an instant, easy, pleasant viewing. However, Parr purposefully includes the small, grim details that we see upon a closer look. Those bleak details of peeling labels, obtuse green, the chipped shelf, and the lack of supply grant a more plentiful understanding. The investigation of *7 Communist Still Lives* helps confirm Parr's fascination with the remains of empire, be those British or Soviet, and the dangerous persistence of Imperialism.

With porridge in Sri Lanka, Parr was able to look backward at the British presence and divulge the cracks, stains, impossibilities, surreal and illogical realities of colonization. In the same manner, in Cuba, Parr utilizes tinned mango to betray similar

¹¹⁷ Martin Parr, *Home and Abroad* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995).

colonial horrors from the Soviet Union. The British shipped Enlightenment ideology to Sri Lanka while the Soviets shipped Communist ideology to Cuba and these transported theories came with horrible actions and consequences. Parr frequently investigates the unique condition of living one's life on a small island nation.¹¹⁸ While much of his work is devoted to England, these two still life collections give us a glimpse into the small island nations of Sri Lanka and Cuba as well. Both were colonized by global superpowers and their transported experimental ideologies, that resulted in an unlikely, yet inevitable, retaining of their own local cultures, in a now hybridized form, creating a transformed culture on both islands. These complex colonial relationships and evolutions are visible in Parr's still lifes, most directly in the ridiculous foods he chooses to depict, as food is a direct cultural understanding that everyone participates in, and carries a knowledge of, on the most personal levels.

¹¹⁸ As does Stuart Hall in *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Small Islands*, and other British literary figures.

Conclusion

In *7 Colonial Still Lives*, images of porridge and fruitcake finely showcase Parr's commitment to disgusting, abject foods. It is these transferred, translated, indelicacies that reveal Parr best as a critic than a strict documentarian. I connect Parr's photographic project, via postcolonial criticism, to nineteenth century colonial photography through an inherited visual relationship with John Thomson and through a theoretical kinship to Stuart Hall. Through establishing a relationship between Parr, Thomson and Hall, we are able to settle a fixed lineage to an "other," a previous site of contention in Parr's work for decades. In earlier works that established Parr's magnitude as a documentary photographer, he continues Thompson's legacy of class-colonization of his own British people, an inheritance that Hall warns us we must be aware of in our surrounding mass media. This continued colonial lens carries with it an accompanying visual, psychological and social oppression with intrinsic, propagandistic messages normalizing racism, classism and sexism. Only recently last year, Parr was complicit in this legacy as he released a new edition of Gian Butturini's seminal documentary photobook *London* (1969) which was later protested by a group of local students who identified blatant racism in a juxtaposition of two photographs of a black woman and a gorilla in the London Zoo.¹¹⁹ Rightly, Parr stepped down as Director of the Bristol Photo Festival, apologized and issued a statement. Parr had released the collection in its original format, with a newly added introduction by himself, and was simply reproducing Butturini's original photography sequences, however, he was blind to the overt racist imagery of

¹¹⁹ Stephen Morris, "Martin Parr Quits as Director of Bristol Photo Festival Over Racism Row," *The Guardian*, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jul/21/martin-parr-quits-as-director-of-bristol-photo-festival-over-racism-row>

traditional British documentary photography. It is specific instances such as these that Hall warns us of and his work is devoted to deconstructing the silent layers of meaning in our daily visual theatre, places where Parr's early critics of *The Last Resort* and later Bristol students were able to identify and contest.

However, an altogether different lens emerges in Parr still lifes that complicates these findings when the still life genre is able to perform in ways the seascapes and portraits cannot. Inside the lens of class difference in *The Last Resort*, Parr, like Thomson, set upon seeing colonially towards his own people with a predominantly rude, judgmental, classist result. However, when in a foreign land and able to view the European legacy in more complexity--in the land of colonized peoples, away from England itself--Parr interrogates deeper than the earlier beach scenes with their binary, high/low class division. In his still life collections, complexities emerge with the assistance of the genre template of the Dutch masters, and Parr conveys what Said describes as colonialisms "confusing amalgam of imperial vagueness and precise detail."¹²⁰ This template enables sites of British disturbances that reveal the ruptures and the ridiculousness of empire. The Dutch genre, in its deceptively simple form, allows layers of meaning that speak directly to imperialistic horrors. The still lifes enable us to interpret and unlock a finer, more nuanced, critical message: the empire is decaying, grasping, and will eventually meet its fate of complete dissolution. Fruitcake and canned fruits are purposefully constructed to endure an inordinately long time, but they cannot last forever. Certainly, Parr has been able to have it both ways, in the same vein that Hall explains Barthes "meta messages," or multiple levels of meanings, that conceal colonial

¹²⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 50.

directives.¹²¹ Parr's images remain highly popular with the everyday British public who view them as a laugh at English foibles and anxieties--which they are, of course. The images have also maintained a formidable space in the art market and galleries as the language of advertising-- large, bright, humorous, kitschy photographs--works its magic and the photographs continue to sell well, and prices continue to rise. Currently, art historians (outside of Parr's own British circle of friends and colleagues) are beginning to plant their feet into Parr's imagery and discover depths and nuances and elucidate his presence in British documentary photography. All of this combines to inform us of the imagery's ability to successfully operate on several levels of meaning making it all that more important that Parr himself take responsibility for the photographic legacy in which he is a part, and as Hall informs us, for viewers to continue to do the work of deconstructing them. In our current era of global reckoning with white-centrism, for Parr to directly engage with colonial photography and its theoretical origins, comes with a responsibility--especially if he is to continue to consider himself a *documentary* photographer—to perform from a place of informed practice and historical and contemporary social consciousness.

¹²¹ Hall, *Representations*, 219.

Figure 1 Martin Parr. Nuwara Eliya, 2004. 7 Colonial Still Lifes. 2005



Figure 2 Tony Ray Jones. Ramsgate, 1967. 1967.



Figure 3 Chris Killip. May 5, 1981, North Shields, Tyneside. In Flagrante Two. 1988.



Figure 4 John Hinde Studios. Butlin's Holiday Camp Postcard. 1970s.



Figure 5 Martin Parr. The Last Resort: New Brighton. 1984-1986.



Figure 6 Martin Parr. The Last Resort: New Brighton. 1984-1986.



Figure 7 Martin Parr. The Last Resort: New Brighton. 1984-1986.



Figure 8 Paul Graham. Beyond Caring. 1986.



Figure 9 Nick Waplington. Living Room 1991.



Figure 10 John Thomson. Temperance Sweep. Street Life in London. 1877.



Figure 11 Charles Negre. Chimney Sweeps Walking. 1852.



Figure 12 John Thomson. Hookey Alf of Whitechapel. Street Life in London. 1877.



Figure 13 John Thomson. Street Floods in Lambeth. Street Life in London. 1877.



Figure 14 John Thomson. *The Fruits of China*. *Illustrations of China and Its People*. 1873-74.



Figure 15 Keith Arnatt. *Pictures From a Rubbish Tip*. 1988-89.



Figure 16 Martin Parr. *Colombo, 2004*. *7 Colonial Still Lives*. 2005.



Figure 17 Victor Keppler. Summer Fun. Advertisement for Sealtest Ice Cream. 1950.



Figure 18 Martin Parr. Havana, Cuba. 2000. 7 Communist Still Lifes. 2003.



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INTERVIEW

I had the pleasure of interviewing Martin Parr in relation to this thesis. We established an email correspondence after I became a sponsor of the Martin Parr Foundation and in exchange for sponsorship, he agreed to a short interview of thirty minutes. Due to the pandemic, we were forced to correspond via Zoom, however, it also proved advantageous as I would not have had this opportunity with my being in Houston and Parr in Bristol. With the time difference, I began at 10AM and he at 4PM. I was conducting from my home office, with a view of a poster by the British photographer Phillip Ebeling from his collection *London Ends* while Parr was speaking from his couch at home in Bristol with a window view of trees and greenery.

The following interview is edited for clarity.

Martin Parr: Hi

Cammie Tipton: Hey there, how are you?

MP: I'm fine, yeah.

CT: Fantastic! Thank you for doing this, it's very kind of you.

MP: No problem.

CT: Yeah, so...hi from Texas.

MP: So, is it recovered now, Texas, from the storm?

CT: Yeah, for the most part, everybody is getting back to normal. It's taken quite some time, so you know we're dealing with a global catastrophe, a national catastrophe and

now state catastrophes, so you know it's just one thing on top of the other, but yeah, we're doing okay now.

MP: Okay. Now remind me, you're doing, is it an MA?

CT: Yeah, I'm at the University of Houston right now doing my Masters. This is my second career you know getting back into...

MP: What was your first career?

CT: I was an international flight attendant for sixteen years.

MP: Oh really?

CT: So yeah...twenty years of jet lag...

MP: Right.

CT: ...was basically what I had. But you know that though! You've done that as well.

MP: Obviously, I fly around a lot, yeah. Well yeah, I used to but not anymore.

CT: Me too.

MP: And did you do a BA first?

CT: Yeah, I did that way back when you're supposed to do it, so I was in my twenties, and I did a BA in English and Art History.

MP: There you go. And then you pick *7 Communist Still Lifes* as your thesis?

CT: Well, it's both of them. The colonial...

MP: There's three altogether you know that don't you?

CT: Uh, no. I know the colonial and the communist but...what's the other?

MP: Oh, there's *7 Cups of Tea*, and that's it.

CT: Oh, right, right, right. Yeah! I know that obviously, but I didn't put it in with the others because...

MP: No, it's different...

CT: Yeah, I mean, obviously it's not like the communist and the colonial ideologies...

MP: Now, have you got them? Have you managed to acquire them?

CT: Yeah, I've got the two, I don't have the Teas one.

MP: Have you got the communist one?

CT: Yes.

MP: Okay.

CT: Yeah, I think I got them for a pretty good price. I know you do a lot of buying on eBay, you know between Amazon and eBay and independent sellers they go between 100 bucks to 800, depending on who the seller is at the time, so I got both of them for a pretty good price, I think.

MP: There you go.

CT: Thank you for reminding me...

MP: Ok, so let's fire away. I mean, you want to ask me some questions about those particular projects, correct?

CT: Yeah, let's talk about the still lifes first then. I am interested in the two collections, because those are the ones that I'm really focusing on, the colonial still lifes and then the communist still lifes. I read these collections as ideologies that have gained a lot of global traction in the not-so-distant past and then collapsed, and I see these as visions of dying global ideologies that are still stubbornly hanging on.

MP: Um hum.

CT: Can you talk a little bit more about that? And what was your vision in assembling those collections? Because I think they came from, if I'm not mistaken, they came from various other projects and then you assembled these later?

MP: Exactly, yeah. No, I mean I didn't shoot specifically either of them, so this is the archive and then I used to work quite closely with Nazraeli Press. I used to edit some books for them. I did a whole series called Parr Nazraeli, which petered out, in fact, Chris the guy who runs it, asked me if I wanted to do a one picture story, a book, a one picture book, they're called ...what are they called? One...picture...?

CT: One...picture...photobook?

MP: Something like that. Anyway, he asked, and I had to come up with an idea and I thought this is quite a catchy little phrase, so I put them together, so uh, it wasn't the...it was more just a coincidence. And having done that one, he asked me to do another one, so i came up with the colonial idea, because I had just been to uh...

CT: Sri Lanka, yeah...

MP: Sri Lanka. It was an ex-British colony and I had accumulated some pictures. I'm not sure if they're all Sri Lanka, I can't remember now, if there was some of India in there as well?

CT: No, it's all Sri Lanka.

MP: All Sri Lanka, yeah. And so that's how they came about. It wasn't as intellectual as you're ...

CT: [laughing] So what was the impetus for the Sri Lanka trip? Was that for the "Barmy Army"?

MP: Well, I travel a lot anyway. I'd never been to Sri Lanka. I mean, I think we went there two or three times?

CT: Yeah.

MP: I went with my partner. We'd go normally, winter, to somewhere quite hot. And you know Sri Lanka's, it's "India Lite" really so it's an interesting place. And of course, I'm particularly aware of the colonial Raj influence in India and Sri Lanka. I was always fascinated by that. So, we ended up going to Nuwara Eliya? It's the Hill Station, in the sort of old-fashioned hotels, which are very charming. We just dipped in and out of Sri Lanka, and that inevitably includes stuff from the past.

CT: With that hotel in particular, I think that was actually an old colonial outpost was it not? And I think they refurbished it and made it into a fancy hotel?

MP: Well, I can't remember now what pictures were in that book.

CT: There are some from that hotel and then some from, you know, around town. A few from Colombo, which is the capital, and then...

MP: Did you ever go there? In your traveling days?

CT: No, I've been to India quite a bit, but I've never been to Sri Lanka. But you know when I lived in the Middle East a lot of people would go there. It was kind of like a destination for the expats. Because it's inexpensive, and like you said, it's hot, it's fun.

MP: Yeah, yeah. Exactly. So, I'm afraid to disappoint, but it's really much more simple than you've made it.

CT: [laughs]. Yeah, I was thinking about it, and I thought, well I would love for you to do more. Is that anything that you would be thinking about doing? Cause I would love to see...

MP: No, I lost touch with Chris Nazreali, in fact, it makes me think that I should just write to them and say hello.

CT: Yeah. Maybe you should, because I thought this is so much fun working on this, and I would love to have something like *7 Capitalist Still Lives*?

MP: [laughs].

CT: But then I thought you've already done that! You do this a lot. So, then I thought *7 Neo-Colonial Still Lives*? But I mean I have so many ideas of things that I want to see from Martin Parr I could go on forever. One of the things I really want you to do is go around the world to all the various Starbucks because Starbucks is just so ridiculous and so ubiquitous and bizarre...

MP: Um-hum

CT: ...you know, this global coffee-offering, especially in places like Italy where it makes no sense...

MP: Yeah.

CT: ...and then places where the American presence is not really that welcome, and then you have the Starbucks, like in Afghanistan, they bring in the Starbucks coffee. And then places like Iran has the knock off Starbucks, they don't call it Starbucks, but it's clearly a knockoff of the logo and everything, and i think that would be brilliant, that would be fun.

MP: No, I'm behind you, don't worry!

CT: Another question is, I'm really interested in the area of eco-criticism.

MP: Eco?

CT: Eco-criticism. It started in the literary world many years ago and the art history world is just now catching onto it. This year at the big art history conference they do each year in New York the theme was climate change. So, in relation to your body of work I think of the image from...I think it's from *Death by Selfie*, the young Asian lady who's standing there in Venice and she's taking the selfie, and you know, she's smiling and she's wading in water...

MP: Ah, yeah, yeah...

CT: That's a good image. She's got the red dress on, so it's that pop of color there in the middle. And Venice, I know that you have looked at Venice quite a bit with the overpopulation and the mass tourism and all that. Of course, I have been there many times and I love Venice, but it is insane, you know, like, I don't even know what is left of the city. Is eco-mindedness and climate

MP: I'm aware of that. I mean, I think my main subject matter is the leisure pursuits of the Western world which often show what a greedy consumptive society we all live in. But I'm a hypocrite, you know, I enjoy the fruits of travel and staying in nice hotels and eating out, but, you know, it is basically a critique on the western world.

CT: Yeah, so with Venice and all of its changes that are going about, climate is not something that you've necessarily looked at?

MP: No, it wouldn't be at the top of the agenda. It's inevitably there and it's in tourism and the issues of tourism. In fact, with me in Venice, whether it will get back to being the overwhelmed...I imagine it will. It won't take long once people are allowed back in. It was literally the last place I went to before the Covid hit. I was at the Carnival in February...

CT: Ahhhhh...

MP: ...and I'm fascinated by tourism, between the mythology of a place and the reality of a place so Venice is always a good place to explore.

CT: Yeah, I spent twenty years being a professional tourist, so I understand. So, about your Autoportrait series, I really like that one because with the Autoportrait series there's this sense of the global and the structure of the studio portrait and the material objects and the use of these awkward twentieth century technologies. And of course, you have your blank expression which is kind of the thread between all of it. The studio portraiture and the blank expression the objects and the new technologies all combine to remind me of nineteenth century early studio photography.

MP: Um hum.

CT: Is that something that you had in mind when you were doing that series? Do you look back at old nineteenth century photography in any way?

MP: Not nineteenth century, more nineteen fifties, than nineteenth century. Because many of the techniques that I found I've got to just as they were disappearing, like hand colored black and white photos or carvings or whatever. They were about to disappear. So, I went out of my way to try and find people who were still doing those techniques. But they weren't as much nineteenth century, they were more just nineteen fifties, sixties, seventies. The end of the good old analog days.

CT: Ohhh, interesting. Yeah, I'm trying to envision what that would be. Studio photography in the nineteen fifties. When I see them, I see so much connection with, you know, early beginnings of photography, global...

MP: Yeah, right, the nineteenth century, but it's not the name of the game.

CT: Ok, here's a good one: I see your work as being quite influenced by advertising. And I believe that you were schooled in the techniques of advertising in Manchester?

MP: Uh, I mean, they encouraged us to be commercial photographers because back in those days there wasn't really anything else you could be. And now, ironically, I do do advertising myself. You know not so much recently, but I have worked with Gucci and various others like that in say the last ten twenty thirty years and I think I would be appalled by it myself when I was eighteen twenty to think I'd actually do it, but of course it pays very well, and it means I can do things for the Foundation. I'm happy to take the grubby money!

CT: No, it's fantastic! And I love the Gucci ads, I really like the one you did in the chip shop. In the fish and chip shop that...

MP: That was Henry Holland I think...was that Gucci? I don't think it was Gucci.

CT: No, there's another one. There was Henry Holland and there was another one before that, um, that you did in a chip shop with some famous rock star.

MP: I don't know the one you're talking about. [I later looked up the image I was speaking of, and it was shot by Glen Luchford. I wrote Parr an email correcting this and he was kindly responsive].

CT: When I look at your images, I see many of the techniques of advertising being used...

MP: Yeah, I'm aware of the language. The bright colors, the bold signs, things like this. But I applied that to my documentary work way back in the eighties.

CT: Yeah, and just these, not "tricks", but these techniques, these methods, of you pulling the viewer in, and then you know, giving the message.

MP: Um hum.

CT: Because once the viewer is in, you know, they're sucked in and then maybe the message is delivered?

MP: Um hum.

CT: Is that anything that you think of?

MP: I can't dispute that.

CT: What's that?

MP: I can't dispute that.

CT: Yeah. Here's something that has nothing to do with my thesis, but I just think it's really interesting. So, there is a current exhibit right now in New York at the ICP and its curated by Paul Graham.

MP: Oh, yep.

CT: I have looked at the exhibit online and I think it's mostly American works?

MP: Yeah, there are two British artists in there, but the rest are American yeah.

CT: Oh ok. I just wish the world were open and we could just go around and see this.

MP: Well, you can get the catalog. I bought the catalog.

CT: Ok, excellent. Well, this is something that I need to figure out and I can't wrap my head around it so maybe you can help me. Graham is writing about something that he calls "post documentary."

MP: Um hum.

CT: One of the things that he says that I found online is: "This photography is post documentary, no editorializing or reductive narrative is imposed. That there is no story is the story."

MP: Um hum.

CT: So, as someone who is just trying to wrap their head around documentary, now I'm looking at post documentary! What do you feel like that means to you? The term "post documentary"?

MP: I mean, yeah, it's something he came up with, which is clever. I mean, he's a super smart guy. And I guess he's applied it to this selection, and it seems to work. I think he's just saying you know he's getting away from that sort of humanistic Magnum look although people like Gregory Halton are part of Magnum anyway. So, I think he's trying to show that it's not...it's a more emotional thing, rather than narrative based, series of pictures. I mean, it's a printed essay he's written. He's a brilliant writer, Paul. Have you been to his site and looked at some of the other things he's written?

CT: No, I haven't been to his site. I've seen most of his books. I have a few. I know that there was another edition of *Beyond Caring* that some other press had released, and he had written something in there and it was really nice.

MP: He did the *AI*...he was about to do *Beyond Caring*. He did his famous trilogy in the 80s as you probably know.

CT: Yeah, the Northern Ireland stuff?

MP: Yeah.

CT: Yeah, I just didn't quite understand this stuff about "there's no narrative". Because I think for me personally the narrative is some of the most beautiful parts of the photobook.

MP: Um hum.

CT: ...and maybe that's just because I'm trained...

MP: In all his projects there's usually a narrative running through it...a theme.

CT: Yeah, so that's what...

MP: He's trying to write something that stands out, for Paul, an argument.

CT: Yeah. But I'm wondering if ...obviously documentary is always going to change, always shifting and growing and evolving. I'm wondering if this is where he sees documentary evolving into the place of no-narrative? And that there is no story is the story? Maybe it's just an interesting twist? Or is this perhaps what's going on? Or maybe it's a new shift?

MP: I don't think so, it's just a thesis he's put forward which is a clever one, and people like you pick up on it.

CT: Yeah...

MP: I mean, I did a show in New York you know fifteen years ago where I called it "subjective photography documentary". That got picked up for a while, and then... I don't know. Yeah, I wouldn't worry too much about it. It's not that different from anything else.

CT: So maybe narrative will stay, and things will evolve, there will be other evolutions, and either they stick, or they don't.

MP: Yep.

CT: Here's something that I kind of think is interesting, I know everybody talks about Brexit. I think that with the images you did in the Black Country for Brexit you were able to capture what a lot of people were feeling at the time of the debate.

MP: Um hum.

CT: Because you did those images before the split I believe.

MP: You're talking about the marches and things like that? St. George's parade?

CT: Yeah.

MP: Um hum.

CT: So, now that there has been the split and all of that is going forward, people are-- well, I guess I am, and I think other people are too--interested in what is happening with America and England and these nationalistic movements. I think it would be interesting to see how you see the evolution of Brexit going forward. You did some great images of "here's the anxiety that everyone's feeling". And I'm wondering about now that that has gone forward, I wonder what that sense is that if people are happy with it, if they're not happy with it, what are the feelings? Because there will be some good that comes out of it, there will be some ill that comes out of it...

MP: There wouldn't be, but there's also some big problems with the trade with Europe and the fishermen that can't sell their fish and they're some of the strongest people that voted for it, so yeah, it's basically been a disaster. The Tory government got their way and Boris in particular of course so we just have to tolerate it. You know, for us it was a complete pain, when we send books and prints to Europe people have to pay taxes and tariff, duties, I mean it's a nightmare really.

CT: Yeah.

MP: It's just a complete mess and it's cost an absolute fortune to instrument it and to put into action.

CT: Yeah, and I think a lot of the younger generation is saying well why are we doing this because at some point we're just going to vote to go back in and then it's going to be another eight, ten years before we get back in and we're going to be right back where we started.

MP: Well potentially, but... Yes, obviously, younger people voted more to remain than the older people.

CT: So, do you think that that is something that you will revisit? Cause I would love to see the evolution of Brexit, especially up North.

MP: Not really. It's quite a difficult thing to photograph. That's the trouble. You know, it's not there to be photographed, you know, all these tensions on the border and tariffs such like, I mean you can photograph as I did do, some of these sort of hardline Brexit areas showing their nationalism, but apart from that there's not much to do really.

CT: Aw. Um, yeah. Well maybe going back to the Black Country and, you know, seeing what's happening in ...

MP: But to look at, officially, it'd be much the same.

CT: Hum.

MP: I mean, I wouldn't rule anything out but it's not my top priority.

CT: Well, thank you so much Martin. Thank you for your time.

MP: Ok. Well, you have to come over. Now that you're a patron.

CT: Yeah, that would be really great. Well once the world opens up again you know my husband does some work with a group in Leeds and now, he's working with a group in Wales, in Swansea, I think? So maybe once the world opens up, we can get a work-trip out of it.

MP: Right. Well, we're only an hour and a half out of Swansea.

CT: Ohhh, I see....

MP: Yeah.

CT: Oh, that'd be great. I would love to see the archives and look at some actual prints, that would be exciting.

MP: No problem, yeah. Ok, well, good luck with your thesis.

CT: Aw, thank you.

MP: Let us know as to when you come over.

CT: I will, thank you so much Martin.

MP: Cheers, bye.

CT: Bye.